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THE FRENCHMAN BOUND THE MAJOR TO HIS CHAIR, AFTER WHICH THE TWO RASCALS LEFT THE ROOM.

Billy, the Kid from Texas;

OR,

SILVER-MASK'S CLEW.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,

AUTHOR OF "THE VAGABOND DETECTIVE,"
"WRESTLING REX," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

GOLDEN-EGG.

GOLDEN-EGG was a young and flourishing New Mexico mining-town. It was a town of perhaps four hundred domiciled inhabitants, besides an itinerant population of half as many more, and like other mushroom towns of the Far West, was built for the most part of canvas and rough boards.

The history of Golden-Egg was this:

Raymond Wilmont and his friend, Joe Garrett, while on a prospecting tour in Southern Arizona, were meeting with such poor success that after discussing their condition and debating all the different sides of the question from every point of view, pro and con, they resolved to strike over into New Mexico and try their fortune there. So, after collecting the paraphernalia appertaining to their calling, and packing their mule, they struck over accordingly.

"I'll tell you what it is, pard," said Joe, as they were at work one day, "if we don't mighty soon come across the goose that lays the golden eggs, it's my opinion that we'd better pull up stakes and strike a bee-line for home. I'm a-gettin' mighty weary of bamboozling around in this God-forsaken land, I can tell you. A man can't tell what minute a big Injun will come along and gobble him up. 'Whoop-lal! Much chief! Ba-a-h!' and away goes his hair."

Raymond laughed at his friend's ludicrous exemplification of the scalping process, and replied:

"Well, Joe, to tell the truth I am getting tired of it myself; but—Hullo! perhaps this may be our golden-egg goose coming up the canyon now." And he pointed to a sorry-looking individual who was at that moment approaching.

"Good-mornin', gov'nors, good-mornin'!" the man exclaimed, when he came up. "How d'ye do? My name is Wells—Christopher C. Wells. Kitty, fer short. I'm proud and happy to meet ye."

"D'ye find th' yaller—th' genuine article? or is it a blind? See here!" he exclaimed, as he produced several specimens of ore, "how's them? Ain't them rich? Don't th' very sight of 'em jest tickle yer optics? I've found one of th' biggest, sure-enough, *bony-fide* true fissures ye ever heard tell of! Wouldn't ye like to invest?"

The ore was the richest the two young miners had ever seen, and of course they were anxious to invest in such a "find" at once. And as the stranger offered to guide them to the spot where

it could be found in rich profusion, they deserted their claim and started.

After a two days' tramp, they emerged one morning from a deep and narrow canyon into a charming little valley. When they had proceeded about half-way through this valley they crossed a creek that wound its way through it, and clambering up the side of the mountain they soon reached a plateau, where their guide halted.

"Ye see, gov'nors," he said, "I was a-settin' there on that boulder one day, sort of ruminatin', as it were, upon the chronic adversity of my fortune, an' tryin' to pitch bits of rock into th' creek down there, when I happened to notice that they were full of gold. I begun to scout around fer an outcrop, an' I found it before I'd gone a dozen yards. I chipped off a few pieces fer samples, pocketed 'em, an' then lit out fer San Marcial to offer my find fer sale. But when I fell in with you, and you said you'd like to invest, I thought I'd give ye th' first chance. Now, there she be; an' as ye've seen the animile, what's yer bid?"

The young men wanted to buy, but all the wealth they could raise between them amounted to a little gold-dust, their mule, three Mexican dollars, and an old pistol. These, however, they offered for the claim.

Naturally enough the discoverer hesitated for some time, but at last he said:

"Well, pards, we'll call it a trade."

When the exchange had been made to the satisfaction of all parties concerned, Wells mounted the mule and took the back trail for San Marcial, while the young miners began at once to develop their treasure; and in a few days they became fully convinced that the mine was of extraordinary wealth.

"Wells was the Goose," said Joe.

"Yes," answered Raymond, "and this is the Golden-Egg."

It did not take long for the news of the discovery of such a mine to spread, as that sort of news will in the wild, bouanza lands; and within a few weeks the hills fairly swarmed with prospectors, who pitched their tents and camped in the little valley, and who, in the course of a month, had staked out hundreds of claims.

In the mean time Raymond Wilmont had written to his uncle—Major Tom Wilmont, a retired wine merchant of considerable wealth—sending him specimens of the ore and asking him to come out and see the mine. And Major Tom, having first had the specimens assayed, obeyed the summons with alacrity.

When he beheld the mine, he quietly informed Raymond and Joe that he would put up a mill, provided they would give him a half-interest in the property: and this offer, of course, had to be accepted.

"That's th' blessed advantage of havin' ready money," remarked Wells, who had returned to the scene of his first discovery and was again prospecting around the valley. "It's a shame to have to give half of th' mine away just to get a start!"

The two young men thought differently, however. Indeed, they rather congratulated themselves to think that the major had not demanded a two-thirds share.

Prospectors continued to pour into the little valley, rich placer mines were discovered in the neighborhood, and ten months later a town had sprung up. While the Golden-Egg Mine, operated with the very best of improved machinery, was yielding a treasure that amounted to thousands of dollars every week.

So much for the town's history.

Only one street had Golden-Egg, and that followed the winding course of the Little Colorado, as the miners had named the creek that flowed through the valley, and principally upon the north side of the street were the buildings.

On the opposite side of the valley, upon the side of the mountain, could be seen the mine from which the town derived its name.

Most of the buildings were low, shanty-like structures, the majority of which were whisky-shops; and while all were gambling-dens, a few of the larger ones were fitted up for dance-houses as well.

The only house that could boast of having more than a single story was the hotel, whose sign proclaimed it to be the "Palace Royal," and that, taking into consideration the place and the surroundings, was a palace indeed. It was a strong, well-built house, three stories high, and Golden-Egg's center of attraction.

In it were contained the post-office, the Express-office, the coach-office, and, in short, the entire business of the town so far as related to communication and commerce with the outer world.

Twice a week, Tuesday and Friday, the mail-coach arrived, and twice a week, on Wednesday and Saturday, departed; connecting with the line running between Las Vegas and Las Cruces. The days of arrival were always exciting ones in Golden-Egg, and long before the coach could reasonably be expected to arrive the miners would leave their work and come flocking into the town from all directions, each with an air as of having the greatest expectations.

The mills appertaining to the mine had been built in the valley, for convenience and economy in the working of the ore, and it frequently happened that passengers got out of the coach at the mine and descended by means of the rude dump-cars that were used to carry the ore, thus reaching the Palace Royal fully twenty minutes before the coach itself.

Thus was Golden-Egg at the time of my story. Alas! fated city!

It was a Tuesday. The day was drawing to a close and the lamps in the different shops, saloons, and dance-houses were being lighted, but they were hardly needed yet, and consequently not very effective, for it was not quite dark. The town was filled with miners who had come in to see the arrival of the coach, and the street was crowded. Men, and women too, stood in groups, wondering why the coach did not come, while rife were the speculations as to the probable cause of the delay.

In the public room of the Palace Royal was a group of men in earnest conversation.

"I can't help it, Joe; I tell you I am feeling uneasy. If the girl was not with him it wouldn't matter so much, but as it is—" and Raymond

Wilmot ended the sentence with a shake of the head.

"Didn't you say there were two women?" asked Joe Garret.

"Yes; but the other one is quite able to take care of herself, and Major Tom, too, for that matter; but with the girl it is different. What in the name of common-sense he wanted to bring them out here for is more than I can understand, but I imagine they had settled it in their minds to come, and with aunt Julia to back it up their plans have been carried forward. Be that as it may, however, the only thing I desire at present is to see them arrive safe and sound in this valley."

"As for me," put in the postmaster, who was one of the group, "I believe this story about the road-agents is all bosh!"

"Don't be too sure about that," responded Wells, who was standing near; "mebby 'tis, an' mebby 'tain't. My name is Christopher Columbus Wells, although they call me Kitty, for short, an' I never seen a town of this size yet that didn't have to pay toll; an' I've seen quite a few in my time, too."

"You're about right," assented the Express-agent, who was another of the group. "Show me a Wells-Fargo shingle, and I'll show you a trail where you'll find road-agents. The way they follow that sign around is a caution!"

"Well," added Raymond, "we can only hope for the best, but the coach is now three hours late, and that is something new for Double Jimmie. He is a good driver, and nothing short of a serious mishap would make him so late as this."

Further conversation was cut short by a great excitement in the street, and thinking the coach had at last arrived, those in the room rushed out. It was not the coach, however. The moon had just risen above the hills and was shedding its light down into the valley, and the cause of the excitement was seen coming down the street. It was only a man on horseback, but such an extraordinary spectacle of the kind had never before been seen in Golden-Egg. The horse's hoofs were flying wildly about as it dashed along at full speed, and it seemed to be at least twenty or twenty-two hands high; while at every spring it made it appeared to clear a dozen yards of ground. The rider was a little, weazen old fellow, wearing a soldier's blue overcoat, and his position on the horse's back was ludicrous in the extreme. He was sitting as far back as possible on its hind-quarters, holding fast to the crupper-strap with both hands, and at every leap the animal made he appeared to be in imminent danger of falling off. But he held on with great tenacity, and shouted at the top of his voice:

"Up th' road, down th' road, Cooney, Cooney Clay! Up th' road, an' down th' road, Cooney, Cooney Clay! Right about, Baroom!" and at his command, having about reached the end of the town, the horse turned and dashed up the street again to the terror and astonishment of the crowd.

At last, after he had taken three or four turns up and down the street, the little old man cried:

"Whoa, Barnum!" and after a flourish or two of the hoofs at that moment in the air, the giant

quadruped came to a stop before the Palace Royal.

"Good-evenin', boys! How d'ye flourish?" the rider said, his homely, wrinkled little face fairly wreathed with smiles, as he let go his hold and slid to the ground. "I hope I find ye well, I do indeed. How d'ye do? how d'ye do?" and before they were hardly aware of it, he had shaken hands with almost every man within reach.

"Say, stranger," said Santa Fe Pete, the bully of the town, "how d'ye mount that little pony?"

"Show the boys how I mount ye, Barnum," said the little old fellow, and instantly the horse dropped upon its knees, when he sprung upon its back with the agility of a monkey.

"Mither av Mcses!" cried Pat McCarty, an honest young miner, "look at *that*. Did ye ever see such a b'aste? By the harp of Tara's, I'm astonished entirely."

"Stranger," demanded Kitty Wells, as he pressed forward to the front, "what might your name be?"

"Great jumpin' Jerusalem! after my bawlin' my name fer th' last ten minutes, a-purpose to interdoose myself, ye come an' ax me what it are! My name's Clay, gentlemen—Cooney Clay."

"Which way d'ye steer from?" persisted Kitty.

"Wal, pard, I hung up at Santa Fe, last; but to-day I'm fresh from Fort Stanton."

"Did you see anything of th' Golden-Egg coach on th' road?"

"Yes," replied the little old man. "I passed a 'hearse' some time this afternoon, an' she wur jest a-bowlin' right along, too! I spent three or four hours a few miles back here in the hills, though, a-poundin' at some 'riferous rock, as the 'sayers calls it, an' I expected she'd pass me, but her didn't."

"Did you notice whether there were any ladies among the passengers, Mr. Clay?" asked Raymond Wilmont.

"Did I?—*didn't* I? One o' th' purtiest little faces I ever sot optics onto war a-lookin' out o' th' winder as I kim by, an' she said, 'Oh, my, what a boss!'—meanin' Barnum heur," and he patted his horse's neck caressingly. "But come, boys, what'll ye take? Let old Cooney treat ye. Jest lead th' way t' yer boss saloon, an' we'll take a drop o' th' real reluvioatin' jiquid—I mean th' rejuvenatin' liquid. I'll set 'em up all 'round. Forward, Barnum!" and off they started, heading straight for a saloon yclept Solid Comfort.

Another hour went by, and yet the coach did not arrive. Raymond Wilmont had engaged several men to accompany him down the trail to learn the cause of the delay, and they were all armed and mounted ready to set out.

The saloons, dance-houses and gambling-dens were in their glory; but we must leave the good old moon to keep watch and ward over the little valley, while we anticipate Raymond Wilmont and his band in ascertaining what had happened to detain the coach.

CHAPTER II.

THE ROAD-AGENTS.

It was early in the day, and the Tuesday coach to Golden-Egg was *en route*. The passen-

gers were in the very best of spirits imaginable, having enjoyed a night of rest at the last station.

There was Major Thomas Wilmont seated upon the box beside the driver, smoking his morning cigar, and evidently quite satisfied with himself and the world in general. Inside the coach were his sister and daughter, and with them was a colored young girl, who acted in the capacity of waiting-maid to both.

On the top of the stage, besides Major Wilmont and the driver, the passengers were one Professor Buggs, two Chinamen, and several miner.

Last of all, but not by any means the least, was the driver. His name was James James, but to his friends and acquaintances he was better known as Double Jimmie. He had been a driver for Ben Holliday on the old Overland route, almost before a railroad to the Pacific had been thought of, and when roused from his meditations by a little black flask that was thrust under his nose by Major Wilmont, he became talkative, and made the journey quite pleasant by relating some of his adventures of the plains and the mountains.

About noon the coach stopped at a relay station to change horses, and the passengers alighted to stretch their weary limbs, and to eat their lunches. But they were soon on their way again, looking forward with pleasant anticipations to their destination.

"Then you ain't troubled with road-agents on this route, eh?" said Cock Robin, supplementary to an adventure the driver had related just before stopping at the station.

"No, not as yet," the driver answered, "but there's no tellin' how soon we will be. I've been a-lookin' for 'em ever since we commenced to carry th' Wells-Fargo stuff."

"I hope you will excuse my many questions, my good friend," said Professor Buggs, "but may I ask another?"

"Certainly," replied Double Jimmie, "fire away!"

"Well, my good man, what do you do when you are attacked by those fellows of whom you speak?"

"What do I do?" Double Jimmie exclaimed "why, I do just as they order, blamed lively! When they say 'Stop!' I stop; an' when they says 'Hands up!' up they goes, quicker'n greased lightnin'!"

"Are they really such dangerous creatures?"

"Be they? Don't you ever trifle with 'em, *that's* all!"

After that the conversation lagged for some time, and the coach was rolling along at quite a lively speed, when suddenly the professor cried out:

"In the name of all that's wonderful, what antediluvian monster is that coming behind us?"

All eyes were at once turned in the direction indicated.

"Are there any elephants in this country?" the professor asked.

"I never heard tell of any," answered Double Jimmie, "but if that thing ain't an elephant, or a rhinoceros, or somethin' in that line, I'm a Greaser!"

As the object of their wonder drew near, it

proved to be a horse with a man upon its back, and they soon came up.

"How d'ye do, boys, how d'ye do?" cried the rider. "Air this th' Golden-Egg hearse?"

"Yas," replied Double Jimmie, "it air. But I say, uncle, where did ye get sich a hoss?"

"Raised him," was the reply.

"Oh! what a horse!" exclaimed Stella Wilmont, as she caught sight of the animal. "Just look, auntie, did you ever see such a monster?"

"Well, so-long, boys!" said the rider, "I'll tell th' folks ye're a-comin'. Gee-up, Barnum!" and away he went, leaving the coach behind with ease.

At the relay station Major Wilmont had taken a seat inside the coach, allowing Professor Buggs to occupy his place beside the driver; and after the advent of the little old man and his giant horse the professor did not allow the conversation to flag for a moment.

The coach was rolling peacefully along, the two Chinamen were fast asleep, the miners were enjoying a quiet game at cards, and the professor and the driver were entertaining each other when four masked men stepped suddenly into the road from behind some rocks and bushes, and leveling their rifles at the driver's head, cried "Stand!"

"Whoa! Hold up there, you leaders!" and the stage was stopped almost instantly, the driver letting the lines drop from his hands.

"Hands up!" shouted the foremost of the masked men, and up they went, the professor's the highest of all.

"For Heaven's sake, gentlemen," he cried, "do point those deadly weapons another way!"

"Hold your jaw!" was the retort.

"Th—th—they might go off!" the professor moaned.

"They *will* go off if you don't shut up," warned the leader, and to the driver he added:

"Now then, you and your passengers tumble down and bundle out from there, and let us see what you've got!"

This command was soon obeyed, and with Professor Buggs somewhat in the rear the passengers stood forth confessed.

"Are you Major Tom Wilmont?" the leader demanded, addressing that gentleman.

"That is my name, sir," replied the major, promptly.

"And is this young lady your daughter?"

"She is."

"Then you're just the party we want. Number One, do your duty!"

One of the men stepped forward, unbitched the traces, took the horses from the coach, and after stripping them of their harness, except the bridles, led them off up the road.

"Well!" cried Double Jimmie, "if this don't just beat all I ever *did* see! I've had my hearse stripped purty clean afore now, but durn my cats if I ever had my hosses took, too!"

"Driver," said Professor Buggs, in a loud whisper, "why don't you fight them?" And those who looked around saw that learned man under the stage, trying to open his umbrella and conceal himself behind it.

"I ain't a born fool, pard," Double Jimmie answered. "I'd fight 'em if I had a ghost of a chance for my 'white alley,' but not ag'in' sich

odds as this. No, I thank you; not any in mine! Why don't *you* step to th' front and do it?"

When the man who had taken the horses stopped, after walking about two hundred yards up the road, he was joined by another, who was leading the robbers' horses, and leaving all the animals in his care, the first man returned to the coach.

"Now, major, you and your daughter follow this gentleman," said the leader, "and as soon as you are mounted we will join you and be off."

"What the deuce do you mean?" cried the major, indignantly.

"Just what I say. Don't I speak plainly enough? Come, now, we've got the drop on you, and if you don't follow of your own will we'll use force."

The major saw it was useless to resist, so he and Stella preceded their captor, whose rifle covered the major's heart. When they came to the place where the horses were standing they were assisted to mount, and in a few minutes were securely bound to the horses' backs. Then the other "agents," with their rifles still at their shoulders and facing the passengers, started up the road, walking backward, and when they reached their horses they sprang into the saddles and galloped away, leading the two unburdened animals after them, and leaving the coach in a helpless condition.

"Villains!" cried Professor Buggs, coming suddenly to the front and flourishing his umbrella. "You rascally scoundrels! come back till I chastise you as you deserve. Come back, you arrant knaves, till I annihilate you. You bloodthirsty demons—you predacious rogues, come back!"

"Well, boys," remarked Double Jimmie, "heur we be. I s'pose somebody has got to hoof it to Golden-Egg for hosses, an' I s'pose I'm elected to do it; so I'll be off at once. I'd ask some of ye to go along, but of course ye wouldn't think of leavin' these women here alone, so jest keep up your spirits till I return," and off he started at a good round pace.

"Oh, you cowards!" cried Miss Julia, as she glanced around upon her fellow-passengers. "Is *this* a specimen of the kind of gallantry and protection we are to expect in this strange land? For shame!" and she clambered back into the coach, followed by the weeping Dinah.

"Fear not, dear ladies—I mean fair maidens," said the valiant Professor Buggs, "fear not. I am here!"

CHAPTER III.

SILVER-MASK.

WHEN Raymond Wilmont and his little band of eight or ten picked men started from Golden-Egg, they proceeded at a rapid pace up the narrow canyon, and in a short time were seen again as they passed along the face of the mountain above the town, galloping away to the east.

They were well armed, some with rifles, and all with the ever-indispensable revolver, and ready for almost any emergency.

In a short time they met a man who was cracking a whip, and whistling merrily as he walked along at an easy swinging gait, seemingly as happy as a king.

"Bless my soul, if it isn't the driver himself," cried Pat McCarty. "Phat d'ye m'ane by coming along in this style? Where's yer caboose?"

"What has happened, Double Jimmie?" asked Raymond Wilmont, eagerly.

"Everything's happened," the driver replied. "A band of road-agents ordered my hands up, but instead of goin' fer th' coach in th' usual way, they took two of my passengers an' all th' hosses."

"Who were the passengers?" cried Raymond.

"Major Wilmont an' his darter," was the reply.

"Forward, men, *forward!* Double Jimmie, you mount behind Bill Davis, and I'll leave you a couple of horses to get your coach in with. There, that's it; now, men, forward!" and away they dashed at full speed.

In due time they reached the place where the robbers had done their work, and were approaching the coach when a man stepped forth from the shadow into the moonlight, with a revolver in his hand, and commanded them to halt.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"We're friends, pard," Double Jimmie answered, as he dismounted.

The passengers had made a fire and gone into camp, and after making the two women as comfortable as possible in the coach, the men had posted a guard and seated themselves around the fire, determined to make the best of a bad situation until the driver's return.

Raymond Wilmont rode up to the door of the coach and greeted his aunt.

"Dear Raymond," said she, when he had made himself known, "where have they taken my darling Stella?"

"I will soon know," he answered, "and we will bring the villains to account for the outrage."

"These miserable cowards!" she cried, meaning her fellow-passengers. "I wish I were a man! I'd have shown them! The idea! holding up their hands like so many helpless idiots! I suppose if those scoundrels had taken it into their heads to cut our throats, these cowards would have submitted, meek as lambs. Bah, the ninnies! The only one of them all that I heard say a single word about fighting was Professor Buggs. If he had only been armed I am sure the robbers would have been driven off. Oh, my poor, poor Stella!"

"Be of good cheer, Aunt Julia," encouraged Raymond, "for as soon as I can get the coach started I will go to the rescue. When you reach Golden-Egg, go to the Palace Royal and occupy the rooms I have engaged there. Good-night!" and he turned to the men who were harnessing two of the horses and hitching them to the coach.

"Come, boys, be lively, we've got work to do," and then to one of the passengers he added:

"Can you tell us in which direction those road-agents went?"

"D'ye see that hill off thar?"

"Yes."

"Wal, th' last I see'd of 'em they wur a leetle to th' right o' thet hill, a-bearin' off to the north-east."

"What do you think about it, Uncle Sid?"

Raymond asked, turning to an old man of his own party. "Is there any hope?"

"Wal, cap'n, all I kin say are this: ef I can't trail nine hosses by this heur moonlight my name ain't Sidney Summers, which it are."

The coach was now ready, and started off, with Professor Buggs inside by the kind permission of Miss Julia.

"I'm sorry, boys," said Raymond to the two men whose horses he had put to the coach, "but you see it couldn't be helped."

"That's all right, cap'n," they answered, as the coach rolled away, "we'll help do the hangin' when ye bring 'em in."

Raymond then directed the old scout to take up the trail.

For an hour or more they rode along in silence, until at last the old guide stopped and remarked:

"Boys, this are awful tiresome work, an' I've got an idea in my noodle that'll beat it all holler. These cusses has made straight fer Apache Pass. What follers? Why, we'd jest better drop th' trail right heur an' scoot fer Apache Pass, too. What d'ye say?"

"Do as you think best," Raymond assented.

"Wal, then, boys, forward!" and away they went, heading straight toward a range of hills, several miles ahead, which could be seen in the moonlight.

When they arrived at Apache Pass Uncle Sid dismounted, and after carefully scrutinizing the ground for a moment he exclaimed:

"I wur right, pards; they's been heur! Now we'll trot right through ther 'Pass,' an' see what course they've took on t'other side."

When he again dismounted, however, he groaned in spirit and likewise in the flesh.

"Boys," he said, "they's parted. Some's gone one way and some's gone t'other. Ef it wur only daylight now, I'd read this heur thing like a book; but as it are, I'm a little bit to sea. Howsumdever, I'll do what I kin," and he dropped upon his hands and knees, and commenced to crawl around on "all-fours."

"Three hosses hev gone *this* way, that's sure; but durn me if I ain't discomfoodled. Ef it's done fer a blind, then th' pris'ners is with th' small party; but if it's done fer anything else they're more'n likely with th'— Hooroar! boys, hooroar!" he suddenly shouted. "Th' gal are no fool, by jingo!"

The men crowded around him, and he held up to their wondering gaze a little glove.

"She hev dropped it a-purpose to show us which way they've been took, bless her little heart."

Raymond Wilmont took the glove, and afterward, when unobserved, pressed it fondly to his lips.

"I see it all now, boys," said Uncle Sid, "an' we'll jest forge ahead. This heur trail leads to th' home base, an' I surmise thet I can guess purty close to whar they're a-headin' fer ag'in. I'm afraid they's got home by this time though, an' th' chances is they'll be too many fer us; but we'll push on an' do all we kin, anyhow."

An hour or so later a single horseman appeared suddenly before them, and ordered them to stop. The moonlight fell full upon him, and revealed beneath his broad-brimmed hat a shin-

ing mask, apparently made of silver. He was mounted upon a black horse, and in either hand he held a revolver.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"We're a party out after a band of road-agents that robbed th' stage this afternoon," responded Uncle Sid. And he added:

"Who th' tarnation be you?"

The stranger instantly lowered his revolvers, and thrust them into his belt, saying:

"You are after two of your friends who were taken prisoners, are you not?"

"Yes, sir," said Raymond Wilmont; "have you seen them?"

"Yes," was the reply, "I have." And turning half-around in his saddle, he shouted:

"Friends, major; come forward," and from behind a clump of stunted cedars a short distance away rode forth Major Wilmont and Stella.

When the astonishment and excitement had somewhat subsided, the masked stranger said:

"Well, Major Wilmont, now that you are with your friends, I will bid you adieu. And you, fair lady, I trust will reach your destination without further mishap," and raising his hat politely to Stella, he was about to depart, when Raymond requested his name.

"Men call me Silver-Mask," was the reply, and, as though anxious to escape the thanks which both the major and Stella were showering upon him, he rode rapidly away.

"The most remarkable man I ever met," exclaimed the major. "He found us in our trouble this evening, and before we could guess what his intentions were, he was popping away right and left with his revolvers. Both of our captors were killed outright. One of them was mounted behind my daughter, and when he fell from the horse she fell, too; but I guess she was not hurt. We had quite a repast with our mysterious friend, and were just on our way to Golden-Egg."

"Wal, boys," demanded Uncle Sid, "are it camp here, or move fer home?"

The men were unanimously in favor of returning at once, and so they started for Golden-Egg.

"No," answered Stella to Raymond, as they rode along, "the fall did not hurt me at all. But did any of you find my glove?"

"Yes," Raymond answered, "Uncle Sid found it, and with your permission, I will keep it. You see a horse has stepped on it, and you can never wear it again."

"Certainly, you may retain it if you wish, but I cannot imagine what you will do with the worthless thing."

"I will keep it as a remembrance of your adventure," responded Raymond, "and to remind me of its fair owner."

"Do not be uneasy about that, cousin mine," Stella retorted, with a laugh. "You shall be reminded of me often enough while I am out here, I can assure you. First and foremost, let me tell you that you must shave off that beard. I am not sure whether you are yourself or not. Only six years ago you left home with a sickly little mustache, and now I find you bearded like a lion. Off it must come, or you are banished from my society." And chatting thus as they rode along, the time passed rapidly away.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PRINCE OF MARKSMEN.

THE hour of midnight was at hand, and Golden-Egg was in a state of feverish excitement.

The gambling-dens and dance-houses were in full blast.

In due time the coach drew up and stopped before the hotel, and Professor Buggs, with his umbrella under his arm, followed by Miss Julia, and Dinah, got out and entered the house. The driver threw the mail-bag to the postmaster, and handed the Express-box to the agent, and the two Chinamen were just clambering down when Santa Fe Pete rushed forward, exclaiming:

"Look 'e heur, boys; d'ye see these yaller varmints? Ain't it bad enough that we've got Injun, Irish, Dutch, an' nigger, without havin' Chinees, too? Let's string 'em up, pards, we don't want no pig-tails in this heur town!"

A rush was instantly made upon the unfortunate Chinamen by several of Santa Fe Pete's followers, and they were roughly handled.

"No hurtee Chinaman! No hurtee Chinaman!" they yelled. "Chinaman klum washee-washee. No klum dig, klum washee. No killee me!"

"Oh-ho! ye kem t' washee-washee, did ye?" shouted the bully. "Wal, we'll wash ye clean out, right now! Ye *wouldn't* dig, *would* ye? Couldn't *hire* ye to, I don't s'pose. B'ast ye, ef we was t' let ye stay there'd be fifty more of ye here 'n less 'n a week! Bring 'em along, boys, we'll fix th' p'izen cusses."

"Hol' on, Pete," exclaimed a voice in the crowd; "we need a laundry here, durn'd bad! Why don't ye encourage business? If th' yaller-skins is a-goin' to stick to their legitimate callin', leave 'em alone!"

"Who said that?" the bully shouted. "Who chipped in then?" drawing a revolver and springing upon the step of the coach to get a full view around. "Just show me th' galoot thet stuck his finger into this pie, an' see me plug him!" But the crowd was silent. Indeed, the power of the bully was so well known that not a man was willing to interfere to save the Chinamen's lives.

"Bring a rope, somebody," he howled, and dragging the Chinamen after them he and his followers started up the street, followed by the crowd.

On the bank of the creek near the head of the little valley was a big cottonwood tree, and to this the two Chinamen were hurried. Ropes were quickly placed around their necks and the ends thrown over a convenient limb.

"Now, then, boys," shouted Santa Fe Pete, "let 'em dangle!"

"Hold!"

It was a commanding voice that spoke.

The men at the ropes staid their work, and all looked quickly around.

A man was seen pushing his way to the front. He was a tall, splendid specimen of physical manhood, broad-shouldered and handsome.

"What have these Chinamen done to deserve this?" he asked, as he stepped forth under the tree.

"What'n thunder's that your business?" growled the bully of the town.

"Oh, it's no business of mine in particular! I just felt curious to know, that's all!"

"Wal, then, jest wait a minute till th' circus are over, an' I'll tell ye th' whole story. Pull away, boys; let 'em swing!"

"Hold! The first man who pulls a pound on those ropes will get hurt!"

Santa Fe Pete turned and drew a revolver, but before he could use it there came a flash and a report, and the weapon was sent flying out of his hand, hit by a bullet.

Several of the bully's friends drew their revolvers, but they were no sooner out than there came another flash and a report, and one of the men came to grief with a bullet in his shoulder; and before the others had time to recover from their surprise and bring their weapons to bear upon him, the stranger had them "covered" with two heavy Smith & Wessons.

"Hold steady, boys!" he warned; "it's no use. I've got the drop on you."

"Who fired them shots?" demanded Pete, who was again to the front.

"It was I," declared the bold stranger. "I carry a couple of toys in my pockets, my friend, and they go off once in a while of their own accord."

"Mighty tail shootin'," observed Kitty Wells, who stood near.

"My friend," said the stranger, addressing Kitty, without for a single moment removing his eyes from the men he held at bay, "will you please to step forward and release those Chinamen?"

"Really, pard," and Kitty hesitated, "I'd like to oblige ye, I would, indeed; but it don't look exactly healthy in that vicinity."

"Don't feel uneasy, my friend, for if one of these men moves an inch he'll be a corpse before he can wink. I mean business, every time!"

Thus protected, Kitty released the prisoners, who departed for a more wholesome quarter as fast as their legs could carry them.

"Now, gentlemen," spoke up the stranger, "the question that most naturally hobs to the surface is: What are you going to do about it?"

"Wal, boss," returned Santa Fe Pete, "you has got th' drop on us, fer sart'in; an' we calls fer quarter. I've hearn tell o' jest sich fellers as you be, though, an' if there's any sand in ye ye'll fight this heur thing out with me on a fair an' square footin'."

"All right, my tulip; put away your pop-gun, and I will do the same, and then we'll arrange the matter in a moment. There—that's it. Now, how do you want to fight?"

"Wal, s'pose we try it fists first, an' if that don't do, we'll wind up with weepins."

"Just suits me to a T!" assured the stranger, smiling.

The preliminaries were soon arranged, and after laying aside their weapons, the men faced each other.

Santa Fe Pete had a trick of springing upon his man the instant the word was given, and generally catching him unawares, would bear him to the ground, and beat him most unmercifully.

This trick he tried upon the stranger; but never was a man more thoroughly astonished. The stranger caught him on the fly, as it were, and raising him in his arms, threw him backward over his head, landing him ten or a dozen feet away!

The bully jumped up with a howl and a roar and rushed forward again, swinging his long arms wildly about and making desperate passes at the stranger, who parried every blow with an ease and a grace that proved him to be an adept in the science of boxing. Presently, however, he—the stranger—changed his tactics from defensive to offensive, and struck the bully a blow that made him turn a complete somerset, landing him once more upon the ground.

He jumped to his feet again almost instantly, but this time he did not rush forward to the attack, as before. He kept at a safe distance, and shouted:

"Hol'on, stranger—hol'on! I has got enough, I has, an' I don't want no more! I'm no durned hog, I ain't, that don't know when he's satisfied. But jest let me get a hold of my old weepins, an' see how soon I'll make ye take water!"

The majority of the crowd, when they saw that the bully had found his master, transferred their allegiance from him to the stranger; and although the latter declared he did not wish to carry the warfare any further, his friends insisted, and the two men were soon facing each other with their revolvers in hand.

"Now, gentlemen," ordered Kitty Wells, "let each man face his adversary, an' I'll count three; an' th' minit I say 'three,' you are at liberty to unlimber your guns an' go in. Now, then, here goes! One—two—"

"Bang!" went the bully's revolver, but wide of the mark.

"Threel!" cried Kitty.

The stranger fired two shots in quick succession.

"Whoop!" yelled the big rough, dropping his revolvers and clapping his hands to his head—"whoop! yow, yow! who-o-op!" and Santa Fe Pete hopped, skipped and jumped around like a fakir dancing on hot stones.

Several of his followers hurried forward to his assistance, while the crowd surged around to ascertain the extent of his injuries. What was their astonishment when they found that a hole had been made through each of his ears by the stranger's two shots!

"Great Jerusalem an' th' bugle o' Jerrekow did ye ever see sich shootin'?" cried Cooney Clay, enthusiastically. "Stranger, you beat th' Dutch!"

"Well, my friend, are you satisfied?" the stranger demanded. "For if you are not, we'd better finish the business right here."

"Yes," admitted Santa Fe Pete. "I has got enough. But let me warn ye that I'm a-goin' to put cold lead into you some time when ye least expect it!"

"I shall always be prepared for you," the unknown answered, little thinking under what circumstances the bully's threat would be carried out.

The crowd followed him to the Palace Royal, where he registered himself "Jarvis Black."

To which some one surreptitiously added "the Prince of Marksmen."

CHAPTER V.

WANTED, A SUPERINTENDENT.

THE morning sun rose clear and bright, and Golden-Egg appeared as peaceful and quiet as though the wild scenes of the night had been but a dream.

In the Palace Royal were Raymond Wilmont and Major Tom, talking over the business of the mine.

"Where is Garret?" the major presently asked.

"He has gone up to look after the men a little," replied Raymond, "but he will be here soon."

A moment later Joe Garret entered the room, and after shaking hands with the major, he said:

"I'm mighty glad to see you here safe and sound, major. Quite an adventure, that."

"Yes, rather so," replied the major; "but thanks to Raymond and Mr. Summers, or more directly, I suppose, to that mysterious Silver-Mask, we came out all right."

"How is your daughter?"

"She was quite fatigued when we reached here, and I have not seen her yet this morning, but I guess I may safely say she is quite well."

"Uncle Tom," said Raymond, presently, "Joe and I have come to the conclusion that we are about able to give up work and employ a superintendent to manage the mine. What do you think about it?"

"I am perfectly willing," was the reply, "provided we can find a man competent to fill the bill; but I am afraid that will be a hard thing to do in this place."

"We can try, at least," said Raymond, "and if he is not to be found here we can try elsewhere."

"Certainly; it will do no harm to advertise and see what will come of it."

An hour or so later posters were to be seen in several conspicuous places about the town, and although they were not remarkable for their artistic beauty, having been executed with a rude brush and common paint, yet they served their purpose. They read as follows:

"A MAN WANTED

TO

SUPERINTEND

THE

GOLDEN-EGG MINE.

APPLY AT THE OFFICE."

Raymond, Joe, Major Tom and the ladies, were all seated in the office of the mine, when there came an applicant for the position, and as he entered the room, hat in hand, he was recognized by the major and the ladies as one of their fellow-passengers of the day before—Cock Robin.

"Good-mornin'," he said, with a peculiar nasal

twang and quaver, and in a key about an octave higher than the usual tone of the human voice, "how d'ye do? I thought I'd drop in an' see if I could get a job. I see you want a superintendent."

"What experience have you had?" he was asked.

"Well," he answered, "fur as minia' goes I ain't had much, but I used to be boss of a gang of trackmen on the U. P. Railroad."

"I hardly think you'll do," said Raymond.

"No; I didn't s'pose I would, myself; but then there's nothin' in the world like tryin', ye know." And making a bow, he put his hat on, curled his goatee around his finger, and sauntered out.

"I guess we will have to go beyond this valley to find our man," said Raymond.

"It certainly looks that way," said Major Tom, while Joe, who was near the door, remarked:

"Here comes Kitty Wells. I wonder if he wants the job, too."

"How d'ye do?" said Wells, as he came in. "I see by your advertisement ye want a boss here. D'ye mean it?"

"Yes," was the answer, "we want a superintendent."

"Well, if you want a big, A number 1, gilt-edge, double-j'inted quartz-crusher, take me!"

"Are you in need of employment?" they asked.

"Be I?" he cried. "I ain't had a good square feed fer more'n a week!"

The three owners spoke together in low tones for a moment, and then Raymond said:

"We hardly think you could take full charge of the mine, Kitty, but we will give you a place as handy man in general, if you will have it, at fifty dollars a month. You found the mine, and it is no more than right for us to help you along by giving you a good job."

"A regular sinecure, in fact," said Joe.

"Gov'nors," said Kitty, "I'm like a cork. I won't stay under water unless I'm held there. Therefore, when cruel fortune takes me by the scalp-lock and plunges my head beneath th' waves an' the flood-tides of adversity, she's got to hold fast to keep me there. I did think I'd gone under for th' last time, though, but, bless ye, here I am ag'in, a-bobbin' around on th' surface as cheerful as a big blue-bottle in th' dog-days. Excuse my language, ladies, that's my way. Guv'nors, I accept your proposition without further debate." And thus was the discoverer of one of the richest gold-mines in the world—a mine that was "panning out" colossal fortunes for its owners—given a place upon the property that had once been all his own, wherein he might earn his daily bread.

Such, however, is life.

Late in the afternoon there came a personage of a different sort to the office of the mine.

"Gentlemen," he said, removing his hat and acknowledging by a slight bow the presence of the ladies (the Misses Wilmont, who had come in a few minutes previous). "I am here in answer to your advertisement for a superintendent, to apply for the position, provided you have not already found a man to fill the place."

"The place is still vacant, sir," said the

major. "Please be seated. I suppose you have had experience in this line of business, Mr.—"

"My name is Black, sir. Jarvis Black. Yes, I have managed mines in California, and I understand the business thoroughly. I can refer you to Simmons & Sharp, of the Shasta Mine; to Davids & Jackson, of the Little Pearl Mine, and to several others. Here are the letters from those I have mentioned."

"I guess you are just the man we want. What salary do you demand?"

"Five hundred dollars a month."

"And when can you take hold?" asked Raymond.

"Immediately."

"Are you satisfied, Uncle Tom?"

"Yes."

"Same here," said Joe Garret.

"Then I guess you may consider yourself superintendent of Golden-Egg Mine," said Raymond.

The business was soon settled in proper form.

"Mr. Black," said the major, "allow me to introduce the ladies. This is my sister, sir, Miss Wilmont, and this is my daughter."

After a few commonplace remarks such as usually follow an introduction, the new superintendent was shown through the mine, and properly installed, with Kitty Wells as his right-hand man.

"What a noble-looking man!" said Stella, when the gentlemen had left the room. "Such eyes and teeth! But see! there is papa calling us! He is going to the hotel. Come, aunty, and captivate Mr. Black."

"Captivate, indeed! If I am any judge, I think he has captivated you!"

"What nonsense!" cried Stella. But the warm blood mounted to her face and suffused her cheeks with blushes.

They joined the major and started to the hotel, but they had not gone far when they met Professor Buggs, who raised his hat and said:

"Major, and ladies fair, I'm glad to see you well. Miss Wilmont, I am on my way to the foot of the valley to behold the wonderful little waterfall. May I ask the honor of your company?"

"Yes, professor," Miss Julia replied, "you may, and I shall be pleased to go. I love to see the beautiful in Nature."

"This honor is more than I dared to hope for," said the professor, and once more lifting his hat he and Miss Julia started off.

"A well-matched couple, by great!" exclaimed the major, in his bluff way.

When the professor and his companion reached their destination he found a comfortable seat for the young lady, and then flung himself upon the ground at her feet.

They were all alone. The little creek bubbled at their feet as, reflecting the tinted clouds and the grand old mountains, it rushed along and dashed itself over the precipice into the canyon below with a solemn, monotonous roar.

"How beautiful!" cried the virgin, clasping her hands in affected juvenile delight.

"It is indeed," said the professor. "The magnificence of the rutilant water, as it dashes down into this tenebrious gorge, cannot be surpassed."

"How beautiful the sky, too, up there between the mountains!"

"Sublime!" said the professor.

And thus they talked until the sun began to sink behind the western hills. And when at last Miss Julia requested to be taken back to the hotel the professor rose suddenly to one knee, and placing his hands upon his breast over the heart, he exclaimed:

"Oh, liliaceous maiden! No longer can I forbear. Brighter far than sky or sunshine are your eyes to me. No, do not rise! Hear me! I love you. Since first I saw you in the coach I have been your slave. I—"

"Bang!"

"Whoop!" yelled the professor, springing upon a rock and pulling Miss Julia up after him, and she, after a quick glance around as though to calculate on the propriety of the act, fainted in his arms.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear, who is shot?" the professor moaned.

"I hated t' interrupt ye, pard," said a little old man—none other than Cooney Clay—stepping forward with a smoking revolver in his hand, "but this heur tarnation rattler wur a gettin' a little too nigh to ye fer comfort, so I had ter shoot." And he picked up the headless body of a large rattlesnake.

"Oh, Lord!" the professor groaned, pressing the fair Miss Julia to his manly breast. "Thank Heaven, this lady is safe!"

"Heur, pard," said Cooney, as he produced a dirty-looking flask from some mysterious part of his raiment, "jest let a leetle o' this brandy trickle down her throat, an' she'll soon come round." But at that moment the lady came to her senses, and begged piteously to be taken to the Palace Royal at once.

As they walked up the street she leaning heavily upon the professor's arm, he whispered:

"May I hope? Just give me one word, dear lady, and I am your slave forever."

"Oh, professor, I—don't know, I—I—am so nervous, I— Ask my brother. No, don't! I— Oh, dear, oh, dear, what am I to say?"

"Speak, dear lady, just one little word. May I hope?"

"Ye—yes,— I—I mean—"

"Thanks, dear lady, sweet angel, thanks!"

They soon reached the hotel, and seeing the lady safe with her relatives, the enamored professor sought his room.

CHAPTER VI.

A LIVELY SCENE.

THE leading saloon in Golden-Egg was the Solid Comfort. It was located near the Palace Royal, and was a large, one story structure, built of rough clap-boards. But, rough and unpainted as was the outside, the inside was papered and gilded, and shone resplendent with mirrors. It was a bar-room, dance-house, gambling-saloon and eating-house, all in one.

When their labor of the day was over many of the miners sought the Solid Comfort, and there proceeded to enjoy themselves in various popular ways; the other saloons receiving a fair amount of patronage too, and on the night following in order the events of the last chapter the place was crowded.

The news of the fight between Jarvis Black and Santa Fe Pete had spread like wild-fire, and the miners had flocked to town to behold this mighty stranger, who had, upon his advent into Golden-Egg, so severely punished the bully of the town. There was "blood on the moon," as they expressed it, and they meant to see the difficulty to the end.

It was early in the evening when Jarvis Black, Major Tom, Raymond Wilmont and Joe Garret entered the saloon to while away an hour or two, and at their entrance a loud murmur ran round the room. Men were seen to nudge one another and point to the conquering hero, and when the party had seated themselves at a table at the furthest end of the room, some of the more curious ones stood up to get a better view of the great chief, the Prince of Marksmen.

Major Tom ordered wine and cigars, and when they were brought he poured out a glass of the first mentioned and offered it to the superintendent.

"Thanks, major," said Black, "but I never drink. I will take a cigar, however, and smoke with you."

The major did not try to press the wine upon him, but passed the cigars around, and in a short time they were all comfortably settled and doing credit to the name of the saloon.

Presently, in a low voice, holding his cigar up and turning it round and round between his fingers as though his remarks were concerning it, Black said:

"Gentlemen, I expect there will be trouble here to-night. As we were coming in, I noticed Santa Fe Pete in close conversation with a man known in this part of the country as Billy, the Kid from 'Frisco, and it strikes me that Pete is one of his band. Like the Irishman's dog, step on his tail and he'll bite; and taking Billy the Kid as the dog, and Pete as the tail, he has been stepped on pretty badly. Are you all armed?"

"Yes."

"Not that I expect you to help me fight my battles, but if there should be any trouble, you might find use for your weapons in self-defense. We are in a good part of the room for a fight, but a poor one to escape from; so, if you see there is going to be a 'breeze' kicked up, perhaps you had better be nearer the door when the 'squall' strikes."

"My dear fellow, you do me wrong!" exclaimed the major, speaking low. "I have been in harder battles than can be created in this place, and if I ever desert a friend in trouble, I hope to be hung!"

"I beg your pardon, major," said Black, "but I felt it my duty to explain this thing, and not lead you blindfolded into any trouble."

"That's all right, sir," the major answered; "say no more about it."

"We'll stand by you," said Raymond, and Joe added:

"I've heard a great deal about this Billy the Kid, what a mighty chief he is, and so forth; but it's my opinion that he is only a common cut-throat."

"That he is, most certainly; but he is a man of great nerve and daring as well," said Black. And then in a louder tone, as he replaced his

cigar between his teeth, he added: "Well, it smokes freely, Havana or not!"

A little later on a number of women entered the saloon, followed by a man with a fiddle, and in a moment all was confusion. Tables were piled up against the wall and chairs stowed away under them to clear a space in the middle of the floor, and several miners having taken the "ladies" for partners (for which they had to pay,) and several miners having taken other miners for partners, they were soon dancing.

When the order to clear the floor had been given, Kitty Wells, Uncle Sidney Summers, Pat McCarty, and several others moved over to the corner where Major Wilmont and his party were seated. The major ordered more wine and cigars, and for an hour or so they all sat and talked and watching the dancers.

Presently the music stopped and the dancers flocked to the bar, and then it was that a man sprung upon one end of the bar and shouted:

"I want every man jack in this room to come up to this shelf and take a drink. I'm a young man from 'Frisco, I am, and I want to make friends all around. Come up, now, one and all, and the gals, too."

He was a young man with a beardless face, and was dressed in a rich Mexican suit, that was ornamented with gold lace and bright buttons. On his head he wore a sombrero, around which was a gold cord with two heavy tassels that dropped over the brim at the left side. In his belt he carried a small arsenal of weapons, and on the heels of his high cavalry boots he wore a pair of cruel-looking silver spurs.

At his call almost every man and woman in the room crowded round the bar. The stranger threw a small, well-filled canvas bag to the barkeeper to pay for the treat, and after testing its weight upon a pair of scales, the barkeeper tossed it aside and began to pass out his wares to the thirsty multitude.

"Think there's enough to pay the bill?" the stranger asked. "I've got plenty more if you don't."

"Double enough," the barkeeper answered. "I'll give yer back th' change as soon as th' rush is over."

"All right. Fill 'em up, boys; don't be afraid of it, it's all paid for," said the stranger. "I've just come to town, and I want to do the square thing, right up to the handle. I want to be on good terms with all. Come up, pards, come right up."

The stranger filled a glass and offered it to Jarvis Black.

"I thank you, pard," said Black, politely, "but you must excuse me. I never drink."

"Pshaw! nonsense! take it!"

"No," said Black. "I never drink, under any circumstances whatever."

"Do you mean to say you won't drink?"

"That is my meaning exactly, sir."

Quick as a flash the stranger drew a revolver from his belt and thrust it into Black's face.

"Now will you drink?" he demanded.

"No, sir," came the calm reply, "I will not drink."

Only a single second more of this fearful suspense, and then all became confusion. A man stepped suddenly between Jarvis Black and the

stranger, coming from no one seemed to know where—a man with a wide-brimmed sombrero upon his head and a mask of silver over his face—a man whose presence no one had noticed before, who said:

"*Billy, the Kid, you are my prisoner*."

In a second the saloon was in total darkness. A single shot was fired, and then followed a great rush of feet toward the door. A moment later a confused clatter of hoofs was heard without, as, with a wild yell, Billy, the Kid, and his band swept at full speed out of the valley.

The spell that for a moment bound the audience was soon broken, and out into the street the miners rushed in a body. And there in the dim light they could see a band of thirty or forty horsemen flying up the road. But in a minute or two they had disappeared from the valley, and then, as the name of the notorious outlaw was passed from lip to lip, the crowd seemed to draw a long breath of relief that he was gone.

"Great jumpin' Julius Cæsar!" cried old Cooney Clay. "Wur thet th' great mogul—th' big Injun—th' great snappin' terrapin o' th' West? Whew! who'd 'a' thunk it!"

"Yes," said Jarvis Black, "that was Billy, the Kid, sure enough. And he was here in full force, too. When he had me cornered there in the saloon he had his men all around him, and also stationed under every lamp in the room."

"Sart'in sure!" said Uncle Sidney Summers, "fer didn't me an' some o' th' boys try t' draw our 'pops' an' help ye? But, Great Scott! I felt cold steel 'hind my ear before I could get my paw onto a weepin' at all!"

"I saw that," said Black, "and knew that I was in a tight place, and but for the stranger with the silver mask I don't see how I could have extricated myself. I could have put one of those bullets into Billy the Kid's brain as easily as not; but that moment would have been my last, and he and his men knew it, and they also knew that I was aware of it, too, and that is just where they had me. But come, men, don't let us stand here, our mysterious Silver-Mask may be dying. I saw Billy, the Kid, place his revolver against his breast, and fire, just as the lights were put out."

Black hastened back into the saloon, closely followed by the crowd; but Silver-Mask was nowhere to be seen, nor were there any marks of blood upon the floor to show that he had been struck by the murderous bullet.

"This is strange," said Black, "for I saw the shot fired, and Billy, the Kid, is not the man to miss his mark!"

"It is really wery curious," said Kitty Wells. "I thought th' ball must 'a' gone clear through him. He ain't here, though, that's a fact; so I'd venture to say he must be gone."

"There's some big game in all this, pards," said Uncle Sidney Summers. "That cuss wouldn't 'a' come hear with such force fer nothin'. But hang me if I can make it out! He didn't do much damage, anyhow."

"Well," said Major Wilmont, "now that the trouble is over, suppose we resume our seats."

The excitement having abated, the dancing in

the saloon was resumed, and in a short time business was going on as though nothing had happened.

Presently, however, the barkeeper uttered a yell that would have shamed a wild Indian, and poured forth a volley of oaths that caused the dancers to stop suddenly in their whirl, and drew the general attention.

"What ails yer?" demanded Santa Fe Pete, who had been rather noticeable for his unusual delitescence during the previous part of the evening.

The barkeeper pointed to a pair of scales, whereon he had emptied the contents of the bag he had received from Billy, the Kid. There, where many an ounce of the precious metal had been weighed, was a handful of sand, with three or four bullets thrown in to give it weight.

"The blamed thief!" the barkeeper cried. "If he ever puts his nose inside of this saloon again I'll blow his blasted head off! A fifty-dollar bill wouldn't cover what I've lost."

"All hail! good friends, and ladies fair, all hail!"

The laugh at the expense of the barkeeper was checked in an instant, and while he with another string of curses threw the dirt away, all eyes were turned toward the door.

There stood a man of the most remarkable stamp. In general appearance he would have paired well with Professor Buggs, but his air was more exalted. He was a long, gaunt specimen of humanity, wearing a long, black, threadbare coat that was buttoned to his chin. His shoes were much the worse for wear, his face was covered with a stubby beard of about three weeks' growth, and in his hand he carried an old-fashioned carpet-bag.

"By Providence divine I am here at last," he said, as he stalked into the room and dropped his carpet-bag. Then approaching the bar he leaned over it, took the barkeeper by the shoulders, and in a loud whisper, said:

"My noble lord, hear me one single word I beseech of you. I am a man whom Fortune hath most cruelly scratched. At the present moment, my lord, my cameralistic condition is such that I am penniless. Will you, most noble sir, as a matter of charity, under such circumstances, give me a drop, one single drop, of the fiery nectar?"

"No, sir!" cried the barkeeper, moving away from him. "That game is too old! It's played out! If you've got any of the necessary about your old clothes—"

"Ay, most noble toparch, but that, as I said before, is just where the great pain lies. I am, to use the expressive word, bu'sted."

"Then you can't get anything here!"

The stranger groaned.

"You're jist too late for th' free distribution, o'd ghost," said Santa Fe Pete. "It's been a-flowin' as free as water."

The crowd laughed itself hoarse.

Putting down his carpet-bag, the stranger opened it and took therefrom a roll of paper, a hammer, and a dozen or so of tacks. Then he mounted a chair and proceeded to tack the paper upon the wall, and when he had done, the crowd read the following, printed in large and gorgeous letters:

SCHUYLER SHAKESPEARE BRACKET,
PROFESSOR OF
ELOCUTION AND VENTRILOQUY.

HUMOROUS, DRAMATIC, AND CLASSICAL READINGS.
VENTRILOQUISM!

The Professor has Read before All the Crowned
Heads of Europe.

COME ONE AND ALL!

Doors open at 7 o'clock.

The stranger read the poster aloud, and then stepping down from the chair and striking an attitude before it, he said:

"Gentlemen, that refers to me—S. S. Bracket, at your service. For further particulars, see small bills."

CHAPTER VII.

ANGELS IN THE MOUNTAINS.

AWAY up among the strong recesses of the mountains, whose rugged tree-crowned bluffs tower above the surrounding plains like grim and sturdy monarchs, standing upon a broad plateau and looking down into the valley beneath them, with the noontide sun beaming upon their shapely heads, were two young girls.

One was evidently a daughter of sunny Spain. Her black hair fell like a mantle over her shoulders, reaching below her waist, and her black, velvety eyes shone like stars. She was dressed in a richly-embroidered Spanish-Mexican costume, and on her feet she wore a pair of Indian moccasins, small in size and pretty in shape, which were beautifully beaded and stitched. She was about eighteen years of age, and had a gracefully rounded figure and a face glowing with the tint of perfect health, although it wore a sad, weary look, as if some secret sorrow was gnawing at her youthful heart.

The other was an Indian girl, as straight as an arrow. She was clad in a handsome, heavily-beaded buckskin dress, and her hair was braided in two parts which she had twisted into a coil around her head. At her back she carried a small rifle, while a knife and a revolver were in the belt that girdled her slender waist.

"Why does my sister Sweet-Face mourn for her brother?" the Indian girl asked, taking her companion's hand in hers. "Is he not bold and brave, and strong in battle?"

"Oh, Song-Bird!" the other replied, "what would I do if my brother were never to return to me? He is strong and brave, it is true, but he cannot avoid unseen dangers."

"Has Sweet-Face no other friends?" the Indian girl asked. "Are not Great-Bear and Song-Bird her friends? The great warrior, Silver-Mask, did not save their lives that they should desert Sweet-Face in return. No! were he never to return, Sweet-Face would find other friends as good and true. But see! he is coming!" and she pointed down into the valley where a horseman was just coming in sight.

A sunny smile instantly chased the shadows from the Spanish girl's face, and catching hold of her companion's hand she ran with her swiftly down the rugged trail to meet the approach-

ing rider, who proved to be none other than Silver-Mask.

"Oh, my brother, my brother," cried the Spanish girl, when they met. "I am so glad you are here again! What detained you?"

"I have had quite an adventure, Nina," Silver-Mask replied, "and I have much to tell you. But let us go on to the cavern, for I am very tired."

At the entrance to the cavern, stood an old Indian, lazily smoking a pipe.

"Great-Bear is glad to see big chief home again," the Indian said, as he took charge of Silver-Mask's horse.

Silver-Mask entered the cavern, where a small fire was burning in one corner, a crevice in the rock allowing the smoke to escape, and threw himself down upon a rude couch. Nina seated herself by his side upon a stool, while Song-Bird stirred up the fire and prepared to cook some game which she had recently killed.

"Remove your helmet, Miguel," said Nina, and Silver-Mask obeyed her gentle command.

The moment the visor was raised and the helmet removed, the girl gave her brother a hearty kiss.

A bold, handsome, serious face was his, with eyes as black as jet and as bright as diamonds. No disfigurement was there that would cause him to wear a mask, and why he did so was as yet a mystery.

Nina brushed back the hair from his forehead caressingly, and—but was this the secret? There, upon the broad, high forehead was a blood-red mark, the *Cross of the Golden Keys*.

"Nina," said Silver-Mask, presently, "are you weary of dwelling here?"

"No, Miguel," she replied, "it is quite a pleasant place, and by far the safest of any we have had since we began our pilgrimage in this wild land."

"Then you would not like to go away from here, eh?"

"I would like to return to Spain, to Barcelona," Nina answered.

"That is impossible at present," said Silver-Mask, and a shadow passed over his face. "Do you remember the young lady I spoke to you about yesterday?"

"The one you rescued?"

"Yes. As I told you, she is the daughter of Major Wilmont, one of the owners of the Golden-Egg Mine, and they are stopping at the Palace Royal Hotel. As the time is drawing near, Nina, when I must make another search for the lost cathedral, would you not rather spend the time, during my absence, in a lively little town, with pleasant company, than stay here in this nest in the mountains?"

"I suppose I would."

"I thought so. I am going to Golden-Egg again to-night, and I will then engage a room for you and Song-Bird at the Palace Royal."

Song-Bird had by this time prepared the game, and she called Nina and Silver-Mask to the table. Great-Bear, the Indian, stalked in and took his place at the board, and Song-Bird having poured the coffee, the making of which was another of her newly-acquired accomplishments, the meal progressed.

"Great-Bear," said Silver-Mask, "we are going away from here to-morrow, forever."

"Ugh! Great-Bear go too!"

"Yes, of course; but what I was about to say is this:

"We are going to Golden-Egg to dwell among the pale-faces, and Great-Bear—and Song-Bird, too—must forget that they have ever seen Silver-Mask's face. Do you understand?"

"Ugh!" the Indian grunted again. "Great-Bear know."

"Does Song-Bird understand, too?"

"Yes," replied the girl; "Song-Bird has a still tongue."

"I am satisfied," said Silver-Mask, and then to Great-Bear be added:

"When the sun hides its face behind the big hills in the west, then Great-Bear may put the saddle on Black-Eagle and call me from my sleep."

"Great-Bear will do so," was the reply, and then Silver-Mask threw himself upon his couch, and was soon asleep.

"Many pale-faces in Golden-Egg," said Great-Bear, as the girls were chattering like a pair of magpies over their prospective change, "and Sweet-Face and Song-Bird will lose their hearts." And having uttered this bit of logic the old Indian lighted his pipe and stalked forth from the cavern to enjoy a quiet smoke.

"Song-Bird has no heart to lose," said the Indian girl, simply.

"Why?" asked Nina. "Has Song-Bird got no heart at all?"

"The great chief, Silver-Mask, has my heart, and it is all his own."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Nina, "I knew that, long ago!"

"Song-Bird did not tell her sister."

"No, but I have sharp eyes."

"Does Silver-Mask know?" Song-Bird asked, bursting into tears.

"No," said Nina, "but he will know it some time. Come, now, dry your eyes and let me hear you read; for you must learn to read well to please the one you love. I have sharp eyes, Song-Bird, as I told you, and I think your foolish little heart is safe." And kissing the beautiful Indian girl upon her brow Nina and she sat down, the one willing to teach, and the other more than eager to learn.

CHAPTER VIII.

BRACKET'S ENTERTAINMENT.

ON the morning that followed the night of the trouble in the saloon, Jarvis Black was seated in the office of the Golden-Egg Mine, smoking a cigar, when Miss Julia Wilmont and Professor Artemus Buggs entered.

"Good-morning!" said Black, bringing his feet down from the desk and laying aside his cigar, "please to be seated."

"Thank you," said Miss Julia. "Allow me to introduce to you Professor Buggs, whose acquaintance I made while en route to this dreadful place. Professor, this is Mr. Black, superintendent of my brother's mine."

The professor bowed, and held out his hand.

"I am proud and happy to know you, sir," said Black, shaking the proffered hand quite vigorously.

At that moment the door opened, and a person of very tragic air and appearance strode in. He bowed low before Miss Julia, laid aside his hat, and then producing a small and remarkably dirty package from his pocket, he opened it, and took therefrom three cards, which he handed round.

"Prof. Schuyler Shakespeare Bracket," Black read aloud.

"At your service, sir," said the man, with another bow.

"What can I do for you?" asked Black.

"Much!" was the reply. "There will be a freight-wagon here some time to-day, containing all the necessary paraphernalia for a first-class printing establishment. I am about to start a newspaper in this young and flourishing burg, and I want all good and worthy citizens to subscribe. I can assure you the Golden-Egg News will be a wide-awake paper six days out of the seven, and the price is only a dollar a month. Let me enter your names?"

"You may put my name down," said Black. "I am always in favor of encouraging a worthy enterprise."

"And mine, too," said Professor Buggs.

"Do you advocate women's rights?" asked Miss Julia.

"Fair lady," said Bracket, with an eye wide open to business, "I am devoted to the cause."

"Then, sir, you may take my name, too."

Having taken the names, the professor continued:

"The money will be payable after the first issue of the News."

"There is to be a grand entertainment this evening in the saloon called the Solid Comfort. I am to appear in my justly-popular and celebrated role as professor of elocution and ventriloquy. Humorous, dramatic, and classical readings, and ventriloquism." And quoting his play-bill entire, he went on:

"The professor has read before all the crowned heads of Europe. Come one and all. Doors open at seven o'clock. The professor will struggle to the front at eight."

"I hope I shall see you all present, and for further information—see small bills." Then with another bow he opened the door and took his leave.

Miss Julia and Professor Buggs departed soon after, and then in a few moments back came Professor Bracket.

"Say! who is that lady?" he asked.

"That is Major Wilmont's sister," Black answered.

"He's the man that runs this mine, ain't he?"

"Yes, sir; he is at the head of it."

"And she, being related to him, is likewise related to the mine?"

"In a manner, yes."

"That being the case," said Bracket, "I'm in clover. As soon as our Chinese citizens get ready for business, I shall have a billed shirt, and then adieu to Professor Buggs. Proclaim it, not upon the house-tops, my Christian friend, but that fair lady is destined to become my bride."

"If mortal man can win her hand,
I'm the man to do it."

"I have been on the lookout for a wife for

quite a long time, and now I guess I've found her."

And once more he departed

"Well, well, well!" said Black, as he relighted his cigar and threw his feet upon the desk again; "of all places in the world for 'characters' and 'originals,' take a wild Western town like this."

Prof. Schuyler Shakespeare Bracket improved every minute of the day in canvassing the town of Golden-Egg and the neighborhood adjacent thereunto, soliciting subscribers for the promised Golden-Egg News, and also advertising his public entertainment, which was to come off that evening in the Solid Comfort. And when the shades of night began to fall over the little valley, the miners flocked into town to "see the circus."

Satisfactory pecuniary arrangements had been made with the proprietor of the Solid Comfort, and precisely at seven o'clock the professor took his place at the door to collect the fares.

His very first applicant was Cock Robin.

"Be you the man what turns th' crank?" he asked.

"I am the man who is to give the entertainment, if that is what you mean," the professor replied.

"Jest so. Now, s'pose a worthy citizen comes to you an' says he's strapped; will ye let him in?"

"No, sir."

"Jest so ag'in. Hev ye got a partner?"

"No."

"Then, who tends door while th' performance is a-goin' on?"

"Oh! I generally find some good and honest pilgrim who is willing to do it for a trifling consideration," was the reply.

"Then, pard," said Robin, "that pilgrim's me. I'm yer huckleberry."

"Eh?"

"I mean that I'm a-lookin' fer jest sich a job."

"Are you honest?"

"Honest as th' day is long!"

"Well, I'll try you. I will pay you a fair price, and trust to your honesty. At present you may go in and regulate the lamps a little." And thus did Cock Robin become a satellite to the great professor.

The saloon filled very rapidly, the miners paying their mite and entering in a peaceable manner, and all was passing off nicely until Santa Fe Pete tried to bully his way in without paying.

"Hold on there, my Christam friend!" the professor exclaimed. "You must 'ante up,' or at these portals you cannot enter!"

"D'you own ther place?" the bully growled.

"Yes. This building is mine until the clocks peal out the hour of eleven."

"Wal, I don't keer a cuss whose it are, I'm a-goin' in; an' I ain't a-goin' fer t' pay nothin', neither. You hear me!" and he gave the professor an angry push and stepped into the saloon.

"Bolts and shackles!" cried the enraged professor, "shall this fellow live? No! by my father's beard, no! Base Trojan, thou shalt perish!" And catching the bully by the neck he jerked him out into the street in the twinkling of an eye.

Santa Fe Pete made a blustering attempt to draw his knife, but finding the professor's revol-

ver already under his nose, he desisted and walked away. Verily, his star as the bully of the town was set.

Major Wilmont, with Stella, followed by Prof. Bugas and Miss Julia, with Dinah Lee, entered and took up the seats that had been reserved for them, and the men who were smoking threw away their cigars out of respect for the ladies, prominent among them being Kitty Wells, Uncle Sidney Summers, Cooney Clay, Pat McCarty and others.

Raymond Wilmont and Joe Garret sauntered in and seated themselves near the major and Stella, and at a few minutes to eight o'clock Professor Bracket placed Cock Robin at the door, and retired to the kitchen at the rear of the saloon to make himself ready for the stage.

The stage, by the way, was a temporary structure, about twelve feet by twelve in size, made by laying boards loosely upon some empty boxes.

In a short time, at eight o'clock precisely, the professor reappeared. He was dressed in a red flannel shirt and a paper collar, a low-cut vest and a swallow-tail coat, a pair of rough and seedy trowsers and rougher cowhide boots. And as he stepped upon his platform he created quite a sensation.

He bowed.

Men continued to drop in by twos and threes, and by ten o'clock the place was crowded.

About that time Silver-Mask entered, and found his way to Major Wilmont, who greeted him heartily, as did Stella and the others.

"Do you notice anything a little peculiar about this crowd, major?" Silver-Mask asked.

"No," replied the major, as he glanced around the room, "I can't say that I do. What is it?"

"Do you not perceive a great number of men with red cords around their hats? They are all around us, and one is stationed near every lamp in the room."

"By George!" cried the major, in a suppressed voice, "you are right. Whom do you take them to be?"

"They are the men who stopped the stage and carried you and your daughter off."

"Great heavens! can this be true? I must get my daughter away from here at once!"

"Too late," said Silver-Mask, calmly. "We must not let them know we have detected them, and perhaps we may be able to capture their leader. I will pass the word to our friends, and then we will wait for further movements on the part of the rascals."

Silver-Mask quietly informed Raymond and Joe, and they in turn, and in the most cautious manner, conveyed the information to Uncle Sid and the others who were seated near them.

"And now," said Professor Bracket, as the hour of eleven drew nigh, "with the exception of a few remarks which I desire to make, the performance is over."

"I have a brother. His name is Abminadab Sardanapalus Bracket. He is a minister. He is now on his way to this place, where he hopes to engage in his good work, and I trust that you will receive him as warmly into your midst as you have received me. He will also fill the post of associate editor of the Golden-Egg News, and if any among you should become matrimonially

inclined, you will find it greatly to your advantage to call upon us. We will give you a first-class wedding and a gilt-edge certificate, together with a quarter-column notice in the *News*, all for the modest sum of twenty-five dollars.

"I must return thanks for your kind appreciation of my modest endeavors to please you, and inform you that the receipts of the evening are sufficient to set the *Golden-Egg News* up in fine style, and give the enterprise a healthy start.

"I will now bid you all good-night and retire to my humble cot, where, throwing myself into Morpheus's arms, I shall soon be conveyed to the land of elysian repose."

And bowing very low to his audience, the professor stepped down from his platform and disappeared into the kitchen.

As the door closed behind his retreating form a short, sharp whistle was heard, and instantly every light was extinguished. Then came a great rush of feet, and all was confusion. The women screamed, and the men shouted and struck at one another as they crowded toward the door.

Silver-Mask, Major Wilmont, Raymond, Joe Garret and Uncle Sidney Summers all stepped in front of Stella, and not an instant too soon; for hardly was the room plunged in darkness when two men sprang forward to seize her. Silver-Mask caught one of them and Raymond the other, and in a trice they were both securely held by willing hands.

"So, my bird, we've got you, have we?"

"Yes," answered the outlaw, "and you'd better make the most of your advantage."

"Have no doubts upon that score," was the reply. "We'll hang you to-morrow as high as Gilderoy's kite."

"Well, boys," said Major Wilmont, "I must leave you and take the ladies to the hotel, but I hope you will give the prisoners a fair hearing before you decide their fate."

"They shall have a fair trial in the morning, sir," said Silver-Mask.

"And, by the way, major," he added, "I would like to see you for a few moments, if I may, before you retire for the night."

"Certainly, my dear sir. I will wait for you at the hotel."

The major went out with Stella leaning upon his arm, five or six armed men bearing him company, and Professor Buggs followed with Miss Julia and Dinah.

"'Tis now th' wery witchin' time of night," said Kitty Wells, imitating Professor Bracket, "when churchyards yawn, an' hell itself breathes forth contagion to the world. Now could I do such bitter business as the day would quake to look upon. Bring forth this vulgar villain, pards, and we'll elevate him in less'n two shakes of a lamb's tail!"

"Be thou not too hasty, Kitty, my dear," said Uncle Sidney Summers. "We've had quite enough fun for one night, an' ef we hang these heur boss thieves now we won't have any fun fer to-morrer; so we'd better keep 'em over."

"Have you a jail here in town?" asked Silver-Mask.

"No," said Uncle Sid, "but there's a purty stout sort o' cabin down the street heur a ways that'll do."

"Boys," said Kitty Wells, "sure's ye lock 'em up ye'll lose 'em. Better fix 'em out, right now!"

"We can't hang them without a trial," said Silver-Mask, "and as it is now too late to go in to the case to-night we must lock them up and make the best of it. I guess they will not get away if they are well guarded."

"Wal, bring 'em along, boys," said Uncle Sid, as he moved toward the door. "Make way, gentlemen, don't crowd th' mourners," and he led the way to the jail.

The cabin was a small one, having but a single room, and Silver-Mask and Raymond Wilmont examined it carefully before trusting the prisoners to its care. But finding it capable of holding them, they were placed within and the door secured. Then a guard of five men was posted, of which Pat McCarty was one, and the crowd went back to the Solid Comfort.

"I'll bet forty cents to a slap on th' back," said Kitty Wells, "that they don't stay there two hours!"

"Ye mought make it forty-five," said Cooney Clay, "an' then feel purty sure o' winnin'. Th' Kid has got more friends right here in this very town than ye'd ever dream of."

When they returned to the saloon Professor Bracket was just squaring accounts with Cock Robin.

"D'ye find me all square an' fair, an' true blue?" the latter asked, as the professor counted the money and put it away.

"Yes," was the reply, "for a red-headed man with green eyes, you are remarkably honest indeed. Here is a dollar. Put it with the one you slipped into your pocket when you passed in that wooden-headed Dutchman, and you'll have two."

"Now, professor," said Robin, without even a blush as he put the money into his pocket with the stolen dollar, "I hear you're a-goin' t' start a printin' office."

"Yes, quite true."

"Jest so. When I was a boy I served my time with a printer as principal devil, an' I can do anything from sortin' type to carryin' papers. Don't ye think ye could give me a job?"

"Can you set type?"

"You bet! an' I can tell two-line pica from diamond, every time! I'm no common slouch, I ain't!"

"Well, come round and see me to-morrow, my friend, and I'll see what can be done for you."

And taking a "nightcap," at the bar the professor went to the Palace Royal, and to his humble cot thereat.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PRISONER ESCAPES.

SILVER-MASK found Major Wilmont waiting for him in the public room of the Palace Royal, and drawing up a chair he sat down, saying:

"I hope you will pardon me, major, for having kept you in waiting; but I will be as brief as possible in what I have to say."

"Do not mention it, sir," answered the major. "My time is yours, so do not hurry yourself at all."

"My name," said Silver-Mask, "is Miguel."

Pabascoz. I am a native of Barcelona, Spain. My sister is with me in this country, and, together with an old Aztec Indian and his granddaughter, we are at present camping in the mountains. In a short time it will be necessary for me to leave my sister for a few weeks, and having formed the acquaintance of yourself and your daughter I think I will engage a room for my sister and her companion, the Indian girl, here at the Palace Royal, trusting that your daughter will favor them with her friendship during my absence. If you think of remaining here some time, I will bring them to Golden-Egg to-morrow; but on the other hand, if you intend to return East, I shall certainly feel more satisfied to leave them where they are.

"The old Indian and his grandchild are deeply attached to me, owing to my having at one time, saved their lives, and my sister and I are also attached to them; and I feel sure your daughter will find them delightful companions."

"My dear sir," the major answered, "it is our intention to remain here for some time to come, and I can assure you that we will extend a hearty friendship to your sister and her companions."

"If you bring your sister here we will take her under our care while you are away and I hope you will bring her at once."

"By the way, I suppose we shall have to dispose of our prisoners in a few hours. Do you propose hanging them?"

"My dear major, our prisoners will be far away from here before sunrise. Billy, the Kid, has any number of his men in the town at this moment. Had we attempted to hang him to-night there would have been a terrible fight, and one upon very unequal grounds; for we could not distinguish friend from foe. Why, I can swear that one of the men who are now guarding the prison is a member of the Kid's band."

"Why not alarm the town and guard the prisoners in full force?" the major suggested.

"It can't be done, major," Silver-Mask answered, "for the reason that the Kid's men are already here. If they were expected to come in a body to rescue him, then of course it would be different; but as we can't tell friend from foe, as I said before, it is next to impossible. The only chance this town has got to get square with Billy the Kid is to catch him on a fair field, or else run him to his hole and then force him out. Let me warn you to look well to your daughter's safety to-night, for it is possible that they intend to make another attempt to steal her."

"I suppose you are right, but I hate to see him get away from us so easily."

"We can hold him, major, but only at the cost of many good men; so I would say, let him escape if he can, and wait till we have a better chance at him."

"I will bid you good-night," said Silver-Mask, as he closed his visor, which he had partly raised during their conversation. "I will see you again in the morning, and until then, farewell."

"Good-night, Mr. Pabascoz," said the major; and after bespeaking a room at the hotel office, Silver-Mask went forth into the night.

As the night rolled on apace, the guardsmen

around the "unilocular" jail began to move away from their posts and congregate before the door, where Pat McCarty was expatiating to a companion upon certain (or uncertain) deeds of valor in times gone by, in which he himself had figured as the chivalrous hero. Some of his yarns were possibly true, but whether true or fictitious, they were all told with the same deep air of earnestness.

"Come, boys," he said, "there's no use standing around like stray sheep. The lads within are as snug as bugs in a rug, and we might as well stand here together and have a quiet chat."

Half an hour later, just as Pat concluded one of his stories, a short, shrill whistle was heard. The lights in the town were all out, and hardly a sound was to be heard, save now and then the neighing of a horse, and the whistle sounded with startling distinctness throughout the valley.

"Phat's that?" exclaimed Pat. "Did yez hear it?"

"Give it up," answered one of his companions. "Guess I'll take a peep inside an' see how the prisners is. S'pose they're O. K., though."

So saying he undid the fastenings of the door and stepped within, and then, quick as a flash, drew a knife and severed the bonds that held the prisoners. This done he handed them each a revolver, and stepping back to the door blew two short blasts on a whistle.

The result was magical. In a second, and before Pat McCarty and the others were hardly aware of it, the street fairly swarmed with horsemen, and Billy the Kid and his companion stepped forth from the cabin free men.

"Get in there," he said to the astonished guardsmen, and as he had the "drop" on them they could do nothing but obey the command. He secured the door upon them, and then mounting a horse that was brought to him, he and his followers—the traitor guardsman included—dashed up the valley uttering war-whoops that were loud enough to raise the dead.

The Golden-Eggites sprung from their beds and hurried into the street, some of them very meagerly attired, and they were just in time to see the horsemen vanish into the canyon.

"Great Peter th' Fisherman!" exclaimed Uncle Sidney Summers. "It's most 'nough t' astonish th' natives!"

"Jest as I told ye," said Kitty Wells. "If we'd hung 'em right up we'd have 'em."

The jail was opened, and the guardsmen were pressed for information. Explanations followed, and then the citizens again retired to their beds and bunks.

CHAPTER X.

"A CLEW AT LAST!"

BRIGHT and early the next morning, Friday, Professor Bracket made arrangements for the use of a small building near the Solid Comfort, and having engaged Cock Robin, the two went to work with a will to prepare for the Golden-Egg News—the press, paper, type, etc., having arrived.

Golden-Egg was growing.

The two Chinamen had opened their place of

business, and were ready to "washee-washee" almost anything that might be offered; a store had lately been opened, stocked with a great variety of general provisions, etc., and on this morning a barber had hung out his shingle and flung his doors open to the public, thereby supplying a long-felt want to the community at large. And, with a printing establishment in view, the town was, as the miners said, "jest a-boomin'."

It was quite late in the afternoon when Silver-Mask rode forth from the little canyon into the valley, heading straight for the Palace Royal, and bringing with him his sister Nina, Song-Bird, and Great-Bear.

Silver-Mask was mounted upon Black-Eagle, his noble horse, and Nina and Song-Bird were riding upon a large cavalry horse, while Great-Bear walked behind, leading two pack-mules—or burros.

Stopping at the Palace Royal they dismounted, and while Silver-Mask escorted the girls into the house, Great-Bear, the Indian, began to unpack the mules.

"More shemales, eh?" said Cooney Clay. "Wal, th' more th' merrier, as th' old sayin' goes; but bu'st my suspenders, ef I don't think th' more wimmin ye git into th' town, th' more trouble there'll be! Reg'lar beauties, though, ain't they? Look at th' Injun gal—straight as an arrer!"

"Pard," said Kitty Wells, "ef ever I marry, it'll be to a Injun, an' blame me ef I don't set my old cap for this gal. There's no doubt that Injun gals make the best kind of wives, an' when it comes to a purty little rosebud like this, th' pill ain't bad to swaller, by no means. From this time forth I'll be her wassal—her slave."

Having shown the girls to their room, Silver-Mask returned and assisted the Indian in the unloading of the mules. When this was done, the Indian led Black-Eagle and the mules away, while Silver-Mask saw that the things were carried up to the room.

Misses Julia and Stella Wilmont gave Nina Pabascoz and Song-Bird a cordial welcome, and in a short time they were the best of friends. More suitable garments than those she wore were provided for Song-Bird, and it was then a hard matter to say which of the three, Stella, Nina, or Song-Bird was most entitled to be called belle of the town.

Evening came, and, being a Friday, with it came the stage-coach.

Double Jimmie tooted his horn long and loud as he dashed into the valley, and a moment later, with a loud "Whoa!" he brought his four-in-hand to a stop at the Palace Royal.

"Any agents, Jimmie?" asked the Express-agent.

"No, none this trip," was the reply, as the driver handed down the box and threw the mail to the postmaster.

The first passenger to get down was a *fac-simile* of Professor Bracket, and as the professor was standing near, his double fell into his arms and they embraced.

Never in the world were two men more like each other. They were as similar in all respects as two new pins of a kind. And as they walked away, arm-in-arm, it was a difficult matter, as

Cooney Clay remarked, "to tell t'other from which." Even Cock Robin, as he followed behind them, carrying a carpet-bag for the new arrival, kept his eyes well fixed upon the original Bracket, lest he should get them mixed. He afterward put a private mark on their coats.

There were several other passengers, but as they do not figure in this history we will not mention them.

Darkness settled over the town, and the Solid Comfort filled rapidly, as usual.

In the course of the evening the two Brackets entered the saloon, and stalking forward until they reached the end of the room, they faced about and then Schuyler S. said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, please allow me to introduce my brother, Reverend Abminadab Sardanapalus Bracket. He has just arrived among us, after traveling for many days, and I trust you will give him a cordial greeting."

Here the original Bracket sat down, and Abminadab S. stepped forward.

"My friends," said he, "my brother has just introduced me as the 'Reverend,' *et cetera*. Allow me to set you right. Six days out of seven I am a man of the world. On the seventh day, however, I put the prefix to my name and point out the straight and narrow path to poor struggling sinners. Therefore, when you have heard my teachings, do as I tell you to do, but not as you may see me do myself."

"To-morrow is Saturday, and the next day will be Sunday, and then, if you will come and hear me, I will try and give you a few words of hope and good cheer." And with a low bow he sat down beside his brother.

Professor Schuyler Shakespeare Bracket was in earnest in regard to his intentions toward Miss Julia Wilmont. He was determined to get Professor Buggs out of the valley, and have the whole field to himself.

Now, among his trappings the wily Bracket had a complete Indian outfit, and on this Saturday morning he put it on and started up the valley after Professor Buggs.

Buggs was up early every day, and off in search of a new plant or leaf before half the citizens of the town were awake, and this morning was no exception.

Bracket found him near the big cottonwood tree, and raising his tomahawk he sprung upon him with a wild whoop that made the valley ring.

"Oh, mighty Indian, most noble sagamore," groaned Buggs, falling upon his knees. "Put away your—your—whatever-you-call-it, and allow me to go on my way in peace."

"Hear me," said Bracket, in a deep voice.

"Yes, yes. Speak. I will listen," moaned Buggs.

"You are a medicine-man to the pale-faces," said Bracket. "I have seen you plucking leaves and plants, and I know you are a mighty medicine-man. It is owing to this that I spare your life. But you must leave this place at once, and never return. Before to-morrow's sun shall have set I will swoop down upon this valley with four hundred thousand of my best warriors at my back, and not a single pale-face shall escape. I do not kill my enemy's medicine-man in war,

and therefore I warn you to away at once; for if you tarry until to-morrow I cannot save you."

"Do put away that awful weapon," said Buggs, "and I will do anything."

"It is well," said Bracket, placing the tomahawk in his belt. "Fly hence while there is yet time."

"I will, I will. I will warn her whom I love—I mean I will warn my friends, and—"

Out came Bracket's tomahawk like a flash.

"If you attempt to warn a single soul you shall die upon the instant!" he cried. "The coach will leave in a few minutes. You walk up the canyon, and when it overtakes you, get aboard. Remember, if you do not do as I tell you, you die!" and he flourished the tomahawk in a manner that made Buggs's blood run cold.

Poor Buggs, he was in a dilemma. But at that moment a big form sprung from behind the cottonwood tree and confronted Bracket with an upraised knife. It was Great-Bear, who had been a silent witness of the scene.

"Dog of an Apache," he cried, "you shall die!"

"Oh, Lord," gasped Bracket, and with two hasty jumps he was behind the tree.

Bracket had not seen Great-Bear before, and consequently did not know him; but taking him to be a "sure-enough" wild Indian, he fairly quaked in his boots.

Great-Bear made a dash at the supposed Apache, but Bracket took good care to keep the tree between them.

"The Apache dog is a coward!" Great-Bear cried, with a grunt of contempt. "He dare not come forth and fight his enemy, but skulks behind the tree."

"Most noble and worthy sachem," said Bracket, "I have no desire to fight you. I am the chief of a powerful nation. One whoop from me would bring a thousand warriors to my side. So, if you value your life, begone!"

By this time Professor Buggs had recognized the frightened Bracket, and retiring to a little distance he sat down to look on. He had seen Great-Bear before, and enjoyed the fun immensely, now that it was not himself that was in trouble.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Great-Bear, making a thrust around the tree with his knife that caused Bracket to howl with terror, "talk heap much cheap!"

"Oh, thou noble paramount, forbear! Don't for the love of goodness do that again. It makes my flesh creep! Thou truculent, fucated devil! do not rouse my anger, for if you do woe will surely betide you."

"Ugh, ugh!" with two or three thrusts of the knife that Bracket found it no easy matter to avoid. "Apache dog talks like old woman!"

"Oh, Lord!" Bracket gasped again, as he jumped this way and that to escape the point of the cruel-looking knife. "If I only had my revolver here, I would soon fill you so full of lead that you couldn't draw another breath."

"Great Bear, most noble chief," said Buggs, "this man is not an Indian, but a white man in disguise. He is a bad one, though, and if you will thrust your knife between his ribs the town will shout your praise."

"The white medicine-man is the friend of Silver-Mask, and if the white medicine-man says this dog must die, Great-Bear will kill him."

"Yes," said Buggs, glad of the chance to give his enemy a good scare, "kill him."

It was a case of the biter bit. Bracket had set out to scare Buggs, but now he was getting the worst of it by long odds. Only for the Indian's knife he would no doubt have made a good fight; but the sight of the naked blade, as we have said before, unnerved him completely.

"Oh, thou most armipotent warrior," he said, "let us bury the hatchet and smoke the calumet. Put away that lethiferous knife, and let us go and take a social drink."

"No, coward, you shall die! and when your flesh has made food for crows your bones shall whiten in the sand."

The Indian then made such a decided charge upon Bracket that the latter took to his heels and ran.

"Whoop! whoo-oo-oo!" yelled the Indian as he gave chase, and Bracket increased his speed accordingly.

"Stand by me, legs, if you ever did," he groaned, straining every nerve, and striking a bee-line for his printing-office, while Professor Buggs laughed till he cried.

The Indian continued to yell and whoop, and quite a crowd was attracted by the unusual noise.

Bracket snatched off his head-dress as he ran, and consequently was recognized of all who saw him.

"What an article *this* would make for the *News*!" cried Kitty Wells. "Two columns more gone to waste!"

The crowd hooted and cheered as the professor dashed by, but not a particle did he slacken his speed until he was safe within his sanctum once more.

Safe there, did we say? Not so. Cock Robin was busily engaged when the professor came rushing in, flourishing his tomahawk in one hand and his head-dress in the other, and being excited at the sudden appearance of a wild Indian in full paint, he began to fire upon him with his revolver.

"Hold on! you blasted fool! I'm Bracket!" screamed the professor, as he dodged behind a box.

"Th' deuce you are!" said Robin. "What are you fixed up like a wild Injun for?"

"Never mind that; don't stand there like a fool, but bar the door."

Robin sprung to the door to obey the order, but just as he got there, in came Great-Bear with a blood-curdling war-whoop.

"Oh, Jerusalem!" exclaimed Robin, and in two seconds he was across the floor and out at a rear window, while Great-Bear sprung upon Professor Bracket.

At that moment Silver-Mask entered, and put a stop to further hostilities.

Bracket's plan to frighten Buggs out of town had proved an utter failure; but when it came to a question of physical courage, Bracket was worth a dozen like Buggs yet, and during the afternoon he tried another plan.

Professor Buggs was seated with Miss Julia Wilmont upon the veranda of the Palace Royal, enjoying a social chat, when the other Bracket—Abminadab S.—approached, and handing him a card, said:

"Professor, my brother challenges you to mortal combat, and desires you to name the time, place, and weapons, at your earliest convenience."

Poor Buggs. His heart almost jumped out of his bosom with fear. The idea of standing up and being shot at almost took away his breath.

"But," thought he, "I have the choice of weapons and I will fight with swords only. Swords or nothing. I am quite good at fencing, and perhaps I shall gain a great advantage."

Then remembering that his fair companion was watching him, he quieted his nerves as best he could, and replied:

"Sir, you may return to your worthy brother, and say that I will meet him at four o'clock, before the Palace Royal; the weapons to be swords."

"Oh, Artemus!" cried the fair Julia, as she caught hold of Buggs's arm when Abminadab Sardanapalus Bracket was gone, "this must not be. He will kill you. I know he will!"

"Let him," said Buggs. "No one will mourn my loss."

"Oh! how can you speak thus? There may be a heart whose every throb is for you."

"Fair lady," cried Buggs, catching her hand, "I will fight the rascal, and prove to you that I am a brave man, and worthy of your heart's devotion."

Abminadab S. returned to the printing-office, and reported to his brother.

"Schuyler," said he, "I found your enemy in the company of the lady, and gave him your card in her presence, as you directed, so that he was forced to accept."

"And he accepts?" asked Schuyler.

"He does."

"Good! I will shoot him as sure as my name is S. S. Bracket."

"But, Schuyler," said Abminadab, "he does not mean to give you a chance to shoot him. He demands that you fight him with swords."

Schuyler's jaw dropped. If there was anything in the world that he dreaded, as we have said before, it was a knife or a sword.

"Abminadab," Schuyler answered, "I can't fight him. It is out of the question. I never had a sword in my hand in my life."

"You *must* fight. Your reputation is at stake. If you back out now your chance of marrying the old girl with the bloomers is gone forever."

The news of the coming duel soon spread, and at four o'clock the population of Golden-Egg was congregated to witness the fight.

The barkeeper of the Solid Comfort furnished a pair of very ancient-looking swords, which had hung over his bar as curiosities, and everything was ready for the battle to begin.

At four o'clock the combatants appeared, both very pale, but very bold. They faced each other, and at the word they raised their swords. And then, from the manner in which they handled their weapons, it was plain to be seen that Buggs held the winning hand.

Abminadab S. acted as second to Schuyler, while Pat McCarty filled the same office for Professor Buggs.

The combatants made a thrust and parry, and Bracket received a wound in the arm. This maddened him, and he struck out regardlessly. In a moment more his sword was thrown out of his hand, and he was at the mercy of his adversary.

Down upon his knees he dropped; and begged for his life. It was a ludicrous scene.

"See the curl!" cried Buggs. "Behold the coward! Arise! thou knave, and slink back whence you came." And, still taking good care to retain possession of his sword, Professor Buggs entered the hotel.

Silver-Mask picked up the sword which Bracket had lost, and was looking at it, when, as his eye fell upon the handle, an exclamation of surprise escaped him. What he saw was a curious mark upon the end of the handle, the *Cross of the Golden Keys!*

"At last I have a clew," he muttered.

He went at once to the barkeeper of the Solid Comfort, whom he questioned closely as to how the sword came into his possession, and found that it had come from a band of Aztec Indians somewhere in Southern New Mexico, in the Sierra Madre.

"I want to buy it," said Silver-Mask, as he produced a bag of gold. "Name your price."

The sword was soon his. "A clew at last," he said, as he left the saloon, "and now to find the treasure."

CHAPTER XL

A BOLD ROBBERY.

SILVER-MASK, the Man of Mystery, lost no time in organizing a party, after finding so unexpectedly a clew for which he had been searching for years, and before the sun had sunk to rest he was ready to set out upon his journey to the Sierra Madre.

Twelve good men had he chosen, and among them were Uncle Sidney Summers, Cooney Clay, Pat McCarty, Bill Davis and others, and all were well-armed and mounted.

Before starting, Silver-Mask entered the hotel to bid farewell to Nina and Song-Bird, whom he found in tears.

"When will you return?" Nina asked.

"Well, Nina, I hardly know myself. I shall be gone three months, perhaps four; but no longer. And I may be back in a much shorter time. In case of trouble of any kind that will render it unsafe for you to remain here, I have instructed Great-Bear to take you back to our mountain home."

"If you fail this time, Miguel, will you then give up your search for the lost treasure, and turn your attention to the finding of the survivors of the lost ship Barcelona?"

"Yes, Nina; should this search prove a failure I will then give the treasure up, and put forth every effort to find the children of Miguel Rosario, who are supposed to have been saved from the wreck."

Silver-Mask then bade farewell to Nina and

Song-Bird, and getting his men together, he started upon his perilous journey.

"Two gentlemen wish to see you in private, sah," said a colored waiter to Major Wilmont, as the latter sat smoking a cigar in the public room of the Palace Royal, an hour or so after Silver-Mask had set out from Golden-Egg.

"Where are they?" the major asked.

"In the little room behind the Express Office, sah."

The major started for the room indicated, wondering who his callers could be, and entered at once.

At first he saw only one person, but as he closed the door another suddenly appeared before him with a cocked revolver, and asked him to be seated.

The major sat.

"Perhaps you fail to recognize me," said the man with the revolver.

"I certainly do, sir," the major replied.

The man removed a false beard from his face, and lo! Billy, the Kid, stood forth.

"Know me now?" he asked.

"Yes," said the major, "I know you now."

"Very good. Now, perhaps you can't tell who this other gentleman is, can you?"

"No, I think I have never made the gentleman's acquaintance."

Hereupon stranger No. 2 removed his disguise, but still the major failed to recognize him.

"You must go back about eighteen years, monsieur, and recall a night of storm and shipwreck."

"*Jean d'Amersforte!*" the major exclaimed.

"The same," was the reply.

"Major," said Billy, the Kid, with mock politeness, "let me introduce you. This is Captain Jack, as the boys call him, my right bower. He's a whole team, I can tell you. We have called to see you upon a little matter of business to-night, which he will explain."

"Yes," said the Frenchman, "we are here on business. I would like to have those papers we found in the Spanish belt that night. If you have them about you, please hand them over. I have taken a notion to look up that buried treasure, and I want the papers to guide me to the place."

"You scoundrel!" the major cried, "do you suppose I will give you those papers? Never! Where is the boy whom you stole—have you brought him up to be as great a rascal as yourself?"

"I have no objection to telling you all I know about the boy, monsieur, for it is not much. I sent him to school and gave him a good education, but he run away from me at last, and I have never seen him since. That is all, and if you have the papers about you, please hand them over."

"Sir, if this story be true the boy is now alive and well, and perhaps he can be found. If there is a single spark of humanity within your breast, I hope you will restore him to his sister."

"I have no intention of doing anything of the kind," answered the Frenchman. "If I can find the lost treasure I will withdraw from the mine altogether, and if not I have another plan. Now, those papers! Where are they?"

Most unfortunately the major had the papers with him at that very moment. He had been showing them to Raymond that afternoon, and had not yet put them away.

"The papers may be a thousand miles from here," he said.

"And," said Billy, the Kid, "they may be right in your pocket. Captain Jack, you search him."

The Frenchman stepped forward and began the search, while Billy, the Kid, held his revolver right in the major's face, and the major had to submit.

The papers were soon found, and then Billy said:

"Now, major, we will leave you. But we must request you to sit where you are and keep quiet until we are out of the way. Captain Jack, you apply the persuader."

The Frenchman bound the major to his chair, and when this was done he put a gag into his mouth. Then resuming their disguises the two rascals left the room.

An hour later the major managed to work one of his feet loose, and by pounding vigorously upon the floor with his heel attracted the attention of the waiter.

"Golly!" exclaimed the darky, "who hab done dis?" and he cut the bonds.

"It was Billy, the Kid," the major replied.

"Oh, de debil!" cried the waiter, "am he gone?" and the little darky seemed to turn a shade lighter.

"Yes, he's gone. You don't see him here, do you?" and to give vent to his passion the major caught the darky by the shoulders and kicked him three or four times around the room. "Do you see him anywhere around here, you black rascal!"

"No, massa, no! For de lub ob goodness let dis chile alone."

The major's only reply was to kick him out of the room.

Singly, and by twos and threes, horsemen departed from the Golden-Egg that night, meeting a few miles up the canyon, and when all were at the rendezvous they rode away to the south. At the head of the cavalcade rode Billy, the Kid, and Captain Jack, and they beaded straight for the Sierra Madre. They, too, were in search of the lost treasure.

During the next Monday forenoon the *Golden-Egg News* appeared.

Cock Robin distributed the paper around among the subscribers, and all were well pleased. The *News* was a success from the very start.

There was an item in this, the first issue, to which Kitty Wells paid special attention. It was credited to the *Las Cruces Republican*, and was headed *The Home of Gold*. It was an account of a wonderful valley of gold in the Sierra Madre, in Southwestern New Mexico, and perhaps as great a lie as ever was penned.

The story created quite a sensation among some of the citizens of Golden-Egg, and more than one man set out alone to find the enchanted spot.

"Werily, werily, I say unto you," said Kitty Wells, "there must be somethin' in it. This story must 'a' had a start at some time or other,

based on fact, an' I'll bet there's more truth 'n poetry about it, after all."

"Ye can't most always sometimes tell," said Cock Robin. "There may be some truth in it, an' then ag'in there mayn't; but I'm rather of th' opine that there is. I'd jest like to know where t' find it, anyhow."

"Well, feller-pilgrims," said Harry Bates, an experienced miner, "I once knowed a man who used to swear by th' moon an' stars that he'd seen just such a place once when he was prospectin', but he couldn't get down into th' valley. He took good care to mark th' place though, an' then went off fer his pard; but when they set out to find it ag'in it wasn't to be found. Th' Injuns must 'a' been a-watchin' him, an' changed every landmark he made so he wouldn't know the place."

"I'd be willin' t' bet my old boots that th' place is there to be found," said Kitty, "an' I kin tell ye I'd like t' be th' one t' find it. Blame me if I ain't a notion t' pack up my wiaticum, straddle old Moscow, my mule, an' go find th' place anyhow."

"And then sell it for a song, eh?" observed the postmaster.

"Nary! I was foolish once, but I'll never be so foolish ag'in, you can bet. If ever I find th' adit—th' gate as it were, that opens into this New Jerusalem, I'll put down my claim-stakes an' keep possession like a little man! I tell ye it's 'most enough t' make me concamorate my back like a Cheshire cat, an' say 'meow,' whenever I think of th' Golden-Egg. I might 'a' been in better leather at th' present time if I'd 'a' held on to it."

"Then you wouldn't do so any more, eh?"

"Not much!" said Kitty. "If I was foolish once, that was my misfortune; but if I do sich a thing ag'in it'll be because I *am* a fool."

The next day the *News* made another sensation. On the first page, in bold type, was the following:

"\$1,000 REWARD!"

"One thousand dollars reward is hereby offered for the capture of Billy, the Kid, dead or alive."

"WILLIAM BLOOM

"Deputy Sheriff."

Kitty Wells was between the horns of two dilemmas. He thought he might possibly capture Billy, the Kid, if he made the attempt in earnest, and he also had an idea that he could find the wonderful Home of Gold; and Cock Robin was in the same predicament. These two great minds were troubled sore.

"Pard," said Robin, "let's try it."

"Which one shall we venture on?" asked Kitty.

"Don't you think th' search for th' Home o' Gold would be th' safest for our health an' future happiness?"

"Yes, accordin' to th' eternal fitness of things, I think it would."

Kitty and Robin then went to work to organize a party, and in a day or two they had quite a band. Kitty resigned his position in the Golden-Egg Mine, Robin severed his connection with the *News*, and then for the promised land they started.

It looked as though some one would be likely to find the Sierra Madre, even if there was

nothing to reward him for his pains, for there were sixty or more in the three parties thither bound, and all were in search of that lever of the world—GOLD. Who would find it?

CHAPTER XII.

THE HIDDEN TREASURE FOUND.

ONE night about two months after their departure from Golden-Egg, Silver-Mask and his little band were encamped in the very heart of the Sierra Madre Mountains.

"Thank God," said he, "if it is anything to be thankful for, we are here at last!"

"An' now th' next move will be to find th' Lost City," said Uncle Sid. "I wonder where it is, anyhow? I declare to goodness, I'd give forty cents to know!"

"Well," said Silver-Mask, "we must make the most of such information as we have been able to pick up while on our way here, and trust to luck for the rest. But we must find the Lost City, or prove that it does not exist, before we leave these mountains."

They were seated near their camp-fire, and the meat they were roasting being done, they fell to and ate as only hungry men can. Then they posted their guard, and after talking and smoking for an hour or two, rolled themselves up in their blankets and were soon asleep.

Bill Davis was acting as guard, and as the hours passed by he found that he was getting very sleepy. He realized the responsibility that was resting upon him, however, and banishing all thoughts of sleep from his mind, he continued to pace up and down at a little distance from his slumbering comrades.

It was almost time for him to call Pat McCarty up to take his place, when suddenly he felt a light touch upon his arm. He had not heard a sound, and when he sprang back at the touch and drew a revolver, he was surprised to see a lovely Indian girl standing near him.

"Big wildcats, gal!" he exclaimed, "ye almost made me jump out o' my boots! Who be ye, anyhow?"

"I am Black-Eyes," said the girl, speaking in the Indian tongue, "and I want to see the white chief and speak to him."

"Don't know nothin' about no sich lingo as that," said Bill; "but I'll call th' boss an' let him chin to ye. I wouldn't mind kissin' ye though—blamed if I would!" he added, with a grin.

He roused Silver-Mask from his sleep, and when he came forward the girl said:

"I am here to warn you and your men to fly for your lives. My people will surely kill you if you are here to-morrow. I have watched you all the afternoon, as you wound your way into the mountains, and resolved to warn you as soon as I could do so. Please do not stay here, but go away at once. You are near the Lost City, and no white man has ever come thus far and lived to tell of it."

"You need not be at all alarmed," said Silver-Mask, "for we are able to take care of ourselves, although I thank you for the warning. What sort of place is this Lost City of which you speak?"

"It is within a wall, and has many white

houses. My people say it was built by white men, many years ago."

"At last, at last," Silver-Mask muttered. And then taking from his pocket a small coin bearing the sign of the Cross of the Golden Keys, he placed it in the girl's hand, saying aloud:

"Take this to the chief of your people, and ask him to meet me here at daylight."

The girl glanced at the coin, and then turned and walked away in the darkness.

Two hours later a strange sound was heard. It was like the "bum! bum! bum!" of a base drum, and the distant strains of martial music.

"Phat the deuce is that?" cried Pat McCarty.

"I guess it's Gabe a-blowin' th' last trump," said Cooney Clay as he sat up and looked around.

Nearer and nearer came the music, and at last a bright light shone along the trail and up the valley, and then a long procession of torch-bearers came into view.

They were Indians.

At the head of the file walked the girl Black-Eyes, immediately followed by three men dressed in white, who had their hands crossed upon their breasts, and their heads bowed down.

"Don't use your weapons," said Silver-Mask to his men, who had drawn their revolvers, "these Indians are friends."

When they had come to within a short distance of the camp the music stopped, and the procession came to a halt. Then Black-Eyes and the three men in white came forward.

"Our chief accepts your token," said one of the men, addressing Silver-Mask, "and he demands that you be brought before him alone."

"I will go with you," Silver-Mask replied, and then to his men he added:

"Boys, I am going with these Indians. I may return to you to-morrow morning, but you need not feel anxious if you do not see me before to-morrow night. Should I remain longer, however, you will then know that something has happened."

Saying this, Silver-Mask stepped between two of the men who were clothed in white, and the girl and the other man in white taking the lead, the music started up again and the procession moved on through the valley and around the mountain, out of sight of those who watched the receding lights.

"Thunder and turf!" cried Pat McCarty. "Somebody pinch me till I see whether I'm awake or dreaming!"

"Say truth ain't stranger than fiction, eh?" said Cooney Clay. "Why, ye might tell this to yer own grandmother, an' she'd call ye a liar!"

For an hour or more Silver-Mask was led forward into the mountains, and at last the procession entered a narrow valley which was walled up on either side to a great height, and at the end of which was a narrow opening, beyond which a thousand blazing torches could be seen.

Straight up this valley and through the narrow opening, Silver-Mask was conducted, and then his wondering eyes beheld a grand city, full of white houses and palaces, and he knew that at last he had found the Lost City.

As he entered at the gate he noticed that the girl Black-Eyes was led away in no gentle manner by two warriors, and when he saw them tie her hands together, he knew that she was a prisoner. He soon lost sight of her, however, and then he began to look about to see where he was being led to.

Presently he came to a white palace, and into this building he was conducted. He was taken first into a wide hall, and thence into a large room where an aged Indian was seated upon a throne with several attendants near him, bearing long lances.

Silver-Mask advanced to the first step of the throne, and then crossing his hands over his breast he made a low bow to the Indian, who answered the salutation by a mysterious sign.

"Are you here to take away the treasure of the Lost City?" the Indian asked.

"I am," was the reply.

"How am I to know you?"

"By this token," was the answer, and Silver-Mask bared his breast and showed thereon the sign of the Cross of the Golden Keys.

"It is well. Listen. I am Lococa, the line descendant of Chihua, who was the friend of the good fathers who built the Lost City.

"Chihua was the chief of a powerful tribe, and when the wars were he was on a visit to the good fathers in this place. The good fathers gave him a sword, which had upon its handle the same mark that is upon your breast. They then buried their treasure, telling Chihua to bring his people and capture the city, and to remain and guard the treasure until they could return for it, saying the sword would help him to win every battle he fought.

"Then the good fathers gave Chihua a piece of gold, just like the one you sent to me to-night, telling him that if they should not return, the one who would come would carry with him a golden token of the same kind, and to him, if the strange mark should be upon his breast, the treasure was to be delivered.

"The sword was retained by us, generation after generation, until a few years ago, when I lost it in battle.

"Chihua commanded his people to carry out the good fathers' wishes, and to the present time we have waited for the one to come who would carry with him the golden token and prove his right to the hidden treasure as you have done."

"Is this the sword you lost in battle?" Silver-Mask asked, and he handed the Indian the sword with which Professor Bracket had fought his duel.

"Yes," said the Indian, "it is the same. I thank you for its return. Where did you get it?"

Silver-Mask told him all he knew concerning the sword, and added:

"Can I get the treasure to-night?"

"Yes," replied Lococa; "we will get it at once."

The old chief called a number of torch-bearers, and then led the way out into the street.

As they walked along Silver-Mask was lost in wonderment.

Presently they came upon the ruins of an old cathedral, and here they stopped. The old In-

dian led the way, and after the torch-bearers had cleared away some of the debris they came upon a stone which bore the sign of the Golden Keys. This was lifted, and two brass-bound boxes appeared. They proved to be too rotten to handle, but were full of gold.

"Lococa," said Silver-Mask, "how am I to carry this?"

"My men shall carry it for you," was the reply.

"I think it would be better to have my horse brought here, so that I can securely pack the gold upon its back while under your protection. Will you allow one of your warriors to go to my camp and bring my horse, and also one of my men?"

"Yes, if the man will come here with his eyes blindfolded, so that he cannot see the way."

Silver-Mask produced paper and pencil, and wrote a note, and the old chief dispatched his men with it at once.

In due time they returned, bringing with them Cooney Clay, who was mounted upon his horse Barnum, and leading Black-Eagle behind him.

"No gum games, now, my Christian friends," Cooney was saying, as he came up, "fer if ye try any tomfoolery with me, I'll let Barnum heur loose among ye, an' he'll annihilate the hull kit an' caboodle of ye like a devastatin' whirlwind. He won't leave a grease-spot of ye as big as my hat. He are a terror, Barnum are, so j-ust look out. Steady on yer port, now, try an' find a softer place than that for Barnum to step! Easy, there!"

"You are all right, Cooney," said Silver-Mask, "get down and let them take off your hood-wink."

"I'm mighty glad t' hear it," said Cooney, "fer I tell ye I wur gittin' a little skittish. It smells too blamed strong of Injun heur to suit my taste."

He dismounted, and the Indians removed the bandage from his eyes, and then as he glanced around the little old man exclaimed:

"Catherine Marier! where be I? Is this heur me, old Cooney Clay, or is it some other cuss? Kick me, somebody, fer goodness sakes, fer I believe I'm a-dreamin'!"

Assuring Cooney that he was not dreaming, Silver-Mask went to work to pack up the gold, and in less than an hour he had it securely deposited in his saddle-bags and strapped upon the back of Black-Eagle.

"When this was done the old chief led the way back to his palace, and telling his men to guard the horses, he asked Silver-Mask and Cooney Clay to enter.

"Jigger my top-royal," said Cooney, "if this heur don't beat th' Jews!"

The Indian seated himself upon his throne, motioned his attendants to provide seats for his guests, and said:

"Why does my friend hide his face beneath a mask?"

This, much to Silver-Mask's astonishment, was spoken in tolerably good Spanish.

"I wear this mask," Silver-Mask replied, "to preserve my life. I am hardly at liberty to explain how this is, but, thank God, the time is now near at hand when I shall lay it aside forever, and once more become a free man."

"Will my friend allow me to see his face?" the Indian asked.

"Do you recognize this sign?" and Silver-Mask placed his hands in a peculiar manner upon his breast.

"No," said the Indian, "I do not know what it is."

Hearing this, Silver-Mask raised his visor, and allowed those present to see his face.

"Ha!" cried Cooney Clay, speaking in Spanish, "the Cross of the Golden Keys again? It seems to me that I am bound to stumble over that sign wherever I go."

"What?" exclaimed Silver-Mask, "you speak Spanish?"

"Yes," replied Cooney, "I learned it on a Spanish vessel. I was shipwrecked once and picked up at sea by a Spanish trader, and I sailed on board of her for several years. I s'pose I would have been a sailor yet, had I not got shipwrecked again, on the coast of New Jersey, but I drifted West, and since that time I have hardly seen the salt water. Talkin' about th' Golden Keys, though," he added, dropping back into his English again, "there were four persons on board that same vessel that bore the mark upon them, bet th' woman was drowned when we came ashore. Th' man lived till th' next day, while th' two children—"

"In God's name," cried Silver-Mask, "what vessel was that?"

"The Barcelona."

Silver-Mask sprung to his feet, closing his visor with a snap.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Never thought of it. Had no idea you was interested in it."

"Have you seen either of those children since the night of the wreck?"

"Yes," answered Cooney, "one of them is in Golden-Egg at this minute, I s'pose. She is known there as Major Wilmont's daughter."

"How in the world do you make that out?"

"Why, ye see, th' major was on th' vessel himself, an' he took both of th' children with him. I knowed him th' minute I saw him in Golden-Egg."

"And the boy?" Silver-Mask questioned eagerly.

"Wal, about th' boy I ain't so certain, but once when I was up in Shasta, California, I saw a man there that had the mark on his breast. Of course I don't know whether he was th' boy or not, but it seems to me that I've seen th' same chap since, and not very long ago, either; but durn me if I can say where."

"We must not lose a moment in getting back to Golden-Egg," said Silver-Mask. And then to the old Indian, speaking again in the Indian tongue, he added:

"Will you allow your men to guide us to our camp?"

"Yes," was the reply, "but first come with me and see a traitress punished."

Leaving the palace again the old chief led the way up the street to a place where a fire was burning upon a large flat stone.

"Bring forth the prisoner," he commanded: and to the horror of Silver-Mask and Cooney Clay, the girl, Black-Eyes, was dragged into their presence,

"This traitress," said the chief, "has been for some time suspected, and to-night she was heard to warn you and your men away from the valley. She shall now be burned alive. She is the daughter of one of my warriors, who married a white woman, and if she is allowed to live she will some day do us harm. She must die."

"Save me—save me!" cried the girl, in piteous accents.

"You gum-blasted old thief!" cried Cooney Clay, as he saw what the girl's fate was to be, "if you harm a hair of her head down comes your dog-house, and don't you forget it!"

"Keep cool," Silver-Mask cautioned. "We have got our heads into the lion's mouth, and we must be careful how we act."

Then to the old chief he added:

"This girl deserves to die, but she is young and will make a good slave. Give her to me in return for the sword that I restored to you, and I will take her far away."

"It is well," said the chief. "The girl is yours."

Their horses were brought, and they mounted them at once, Silver-Mask taking Black-Eyes up in front of him.

"My warriors shall take you to your camp," said the Indian, "and there leave you; and tomorrow at sunrise you must depart from the mountains. The commands of the good fathers and of Chibua are fulfilled, and no white man shall ever enter the Lost City again. Lococa bids you farewell."

Cooney Clay was then blindfolded again, and an hour later Silver-Mask and he were with their friends, while the Indians returned to their mountain stronghold, amid the loud beating of drums and the flashing of torches.

CHAPTER XIII.

ASTOUNDING NEWS FOR SILVER-MASK.

WHEN the Indians were out of sight, Silver-Mask arranged a comfortable place for Black-Eyes, to sleep, and then he sat down and questioned Cooney Clay in regard to the wreck of the Barcelona.

Cooney took pains to tell all he knew. He could not remember names very well, but those were supplied in part by Silver-Mask himself. He told the story about as it is known to the reader, or that part of it at least which it was possible for him to know. His leg was broken, and he had to remain for a few weeks in a little village near the scene of the wreck, he and another sailor; but the others went on by rail to New York. He had never seen any of them since, until he saw Major Wilmont and Stella at Golden-Egg, unless the man he saw at Shasta, California, was the boy.

That was all.

In a short time it was daylight. Silver-Mask and his party started upon their homeward journey to Golden-Egg, and they rushed forward with all possible speed.

Two days after starting upon their return to Golden-Egg, they were riding along at a moderate pace through a charming valley, when suddenly the sound of firearms reached their ears, as volley after volley of shots followed each other in rapid succession.

"Somethin' is rotten in Denmark," said Uncle Sidney Summers; "an' I guess we'll soon find some more Injuns to amuse ourselves with. Don't see what it can be if it ain't Injuns."

"Or cowboys," said Cooney Clay. "Mebby it's a lot of cowboys a-havin' a social good time."

Silver-Mask gave Black-Eyes into the care of one of his men, telling him to remain in the rear and keep her out of danger, and then he and the others hurried forward to ascertain the cause of the shooting.

The valley took a sharp turn a short distance ahead of them, and before they could reach the turn the firing had ceased. They hurried on, however, and soon came in sight of the combatants.

One party—quite a large one—was in the valley, partly sheltered by small trees, while the other was intrenched behind a mass of rocks near a narrow canyon. From these rocks there waved a flag of truce—a white rag tied to a stick—and presently one of the horsemen in the valley rode out from behind the trees, and shouted:

"Have ye got enough, up there, neighbors?"

"Do you accept th' truce?" came the reply.

"Yes, show yourself, an' let's hear what ye've got to offer!"

At this a well-known form appeared upon the rocks, and, after a glance around, the man said:

"If it's all th' same t' you, my bold Billy Kid, we beg to announce that we don't want no more. We is satisfied. There's no use in our fightin' ye, Billy, fur adwersity is ag'in' us. Now, we want to know what ye will do if we lay down our arms, advance, hold up our paws an' surrender?"

"We'll hang ye, of course," replied the horseman, "every one of ye."

"That bein' th' case," said Kitty, (for Kitty Wells it was,) "we will stay where we are. To be shot is bad enough, but to be hung is worse; so you may open th' ball ag'in as soon as ye please. I'll haul down this rag, and then ye can sail in an' we'll fight it out." And so saying Kitty took down the flag and disappeared, while Billy, the Kid, rode back to his men.

"Now, boys," said Silver-Mask, "here is a chance for us to have a little fight. Billy, the Kid, and all his men are after a handful of our Golden-Egg friends. What say you, shall we go for them?"

"Sart'in sure!" cried Uncle Sid. "They hain't seen us, an' as soon as they begin we'll waltz right in an' take a front seat."

In a short time the Kid and his men made a charge upon the rocks and then Silver-Mask and his party made a charge upon them, and Kitty Wells meeting them pretty strongly in front, the outlaws soon found themselves in a tight place.

In the heat of the battle Billy, the Kid's horse was struck by a bullet, and in falling it threw its rider with such force that he lay stunned and bleeding upon the ground.

The next instant Kitty Wells dashed forward from the shelter of the rocks, and amid a shower of flying bullets caught the Kid by the scalplock and dragged him back under cover without receiving a scratch.

Immediately after the fall and capture of

Billy, the Kid, his right bower, Captain Jack, was struck by a bullet and killed instantly, and then the others turned and fled.

"My dear Billy Kid," said Kitty Wells to his prisoner, "don't ye wish ye hadn't done so? I'm a-goin' fer to take ye to Golden-Egg, where Billiam Bloom, E-quire, is waitin' fer ye, with a thousand dollars fer th' man who can bring ye to him. I tell ye you're a prize, Billy; ye are indeed. Adversity has gone, and Fortune is once more a-smilin' upon me. Werily, I feel happy."

Kitty Wells would return to Golden-Egg, that was certain; but his comrades were inclined to go on in search of the fabled Maidre d'Oro. An offer of two dollars a day from Silver-Mask turned them, however, and an understanding was soon arrived at. Later in the day they all started upon the home trail.

Silver-Mask looked for further trouble from Billy, the Kid's men, and he did not look in vain; for during the weeks that followed before he reached Golden-Egg he had several fights with them.

One night, while sitting by their camp-fire, Silver-Mask and Cooney Clay fell to talking about the wreck of the Barcelona, and mentioned the Cross of the Golden Keys.

"Why," exclaimed Kitty Wells, breaking in upon them suddenly, "I know a man who has got that mark upon his breast!"

"Who is he?" asked Silver-Mask eagerly.

"It is Jarvis Black, the Prince o' Marksmen," Kitty replied. "I've seen th' mark upon his breast myself."

"There!" cried Cooney Clay, "I knowed I'd seen that chap somewhere, an' now I remember him. He is th' very lad that I was a-tellin' ye I seen up in Shasta, California."

"We must push forward to Golden-Egg with all possible speed," said Silver-Mask. "This man may go away before we get there. It seems likely that he will." And then to himself he added:

"Thank God! I am at last on the very threshold of success. What every effort of mine failed to accomplish, has been achieved by chance alone. Now to see these persons, and prove them to be the two children of Miguel Rosario, and then away to Spain! It will no doubt surprise Miss Wilmont and Jarvis Black to learn that they are brother and sister, if indeed they are. I can hardly understand, though, how it is that his name is Black."

Onward he pushed, until at last he and his men found their journey drawing to a close, and themselves within half a day's travel of their destination.

"We'll be there by noon, if nothin' happens," said Uncle Sid.

About the middle of the forenoon they met a party of prospectors.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Uncle Sid, "where're ye from?"

"We're from Golden-Egg," they answered.

"Glad t' hear it. How's things up in that lively little burg?"

"Everything's a-boomin'," was the reply.

"By the way, my friends," said Silver-Mask, "do you know whether Jarvis Black is still at the Golden-Egg Mine?"

"Yes," replied one of the miners, "he is. An that makes me think of somethin' else, too. There's a-goin' to be a big time in Golden-Egg to-day, an' if ye burry ye may be in time fer th' ball. There's a-goin' fer to be a weddin'!"

"A wedding!" Silver-Mask exclaimed; "whose can it be?"

"Why," the miner answered, "Jarvis Black is a-goin' to marry Major Wilmont's darter. I tell ye, pards, there's a-goin' to be a big time, an'—"

He could say no more for astonishment. Silver-Mask had put spurs to his horse and was flying like the wind toward Golden-Egg, leaving his men to follow at their leisure.

"Great God!" he cried, as he struck his spurs rowel deep into his horse's sides, "shall I be in time, or will I find that brother and sister have been made man and wife?"

Maddened with pain the noble horse fairly flew, but even at that moment Jarvis Black and Stella Wilmont were standing with clasped hands before a priest in the parlor of the Palace Royal, and the marriage ceremony was being performed.

Ride on, Silver-Mask, ride as you will; but no power of yours can save them now!

CHAPTER XIV.

SAVED BY AN ENEMY.

FOUR months and more have elapsed since we last saw Golden-Egg, and to that place we must now return.

The usual coach-day crowd was to be seen in the street, loitering around the Palace Royal and the different saloons, but a perfect quiet seemed to reign throughout the town.

As the morning advanced, however, there appeared to be a little stir of excitement in and around the Palace Royal without any visible cause to warrant it, and people slowly gathered before the hotel until the crowd at that point almost blocked the street.

"What's th' difficulty, pards?" asked a lately-arrived stranger as he pushed his way to the front. "Any one dead, or going to be hung?"

"My dear Christian friend," said Professor Schuyler Shakespeare Bracket, who stood upon the veranda of the hotel, "there's going to be a wedding here this morning."

"A weddin'!" cried the stranger, "be that a fact? Kerwhoop! I'm jest th' boy that kin dance at a weddin' every day in th' week!"

The stranger was a stout, broad-shouldered, one-armed man, dressed in a neat suit of black broadcloth and wearing a broad-brimmed black hat. His hair was long, black and curly, and he had a short beard. He walked with a slight limp, and carried a cane of most enormous size in his hand.

"Yes, sir-ee, a weddin'!" said Santa Fe Peto. "There's goin' to be a grand old circus heur to-day, you bet! You must be on hand an' see it. Shouldn't wonder much if I wur there myself."

"I'll be on hand every time!" the stranger said. "I wouldn't miss seein' a weddin' fer nothin' at all! It's my delight! I'm a-chief, I am, of th' first water. I'm a full blood."

"But say, pard, you're th' first man that I

ever met with that bad windows in his ears. Hope you'll excuse my curiosity, but how did it happen?"

This remark brought forth a roar of laughter from the crowd. The truth was, Santa Fe Pete's appearance had not been improved any by Jarvis Black's bullets, on the night of their little unpleasantness over the Chinese question, and the hole about the size of a half dime in each of his ears drew attention to him at all times.

"Them holes, pard, d'ye mean *them* holes?" and Pete stuck a finger into each of the apertures indicated. Why, I keep them t' remind me of a little scrimmage that I had once upon a time. Don't you fail t' be at th' weddin' though," he added, "fer I tell ye it is a goin' t' be interestin', sure!"

"I'm a chief," said the stranger.

A few weeks previous to the day of which I write, Jarvis Black had gone to Major Wilmont one morning, and said:

"Major, I have received a communication from my lawyer in San Francisco, informing me that I am a rich man. For more than two years I have been fighting for a mine up in Shasta county, California, and at last, have won the battle. I am now the owner of a mine as rich as the Golden-Egg.

"Under these circumstances, major, I have something of rather a delicate nature to say to you, which I would not mention under any other. I love your daughter, and I have every reason to believe that she loves me. I would ask your permission to lay myself and my fortune at her feet, and ask her to become my wife; for I think that our marriage would be a happy one.

"I am all alone in the world, unless my sister, whom I have not seen since we were children together, is still living; and I am, and always have been, an honest man. I am a Spaniard by birth, but thoroughly Americanized, and this is now my country."

"My dear Jarvis," the major answered, "you astonish me. I had no idea of this. But I like you, sir; and if your record is clear, have no objections to your seeking Stella's hand in marriage.

"Allow me to tell you, however, that she is not my daughter, although she does not know this, nor is it necessary that she should. She came to me when she was only four or five years of age, and does not remember her parents. But I can assure you that she is of honest birth. Her father was a gentleman, and her mother was one of the most amiable ladies I ever met. I will tell you all I know of her history. I—"

"Major," said Black, "I do not wish to hear it. I love the lady for herself alone. She bears your name, and as your daughter I will marry her."

A week later he spoke to the major again.

"Major," said he, "Stella has promised to be my wife."

"Jarvis," said the major, "take her and make her happy, and may she prove a good wife."

And thus it came about that there was to be a wedding in the Palace Royal.

A messenger had been sent to Las Cruces to secure the services of a priest, and in due time

he had returned, bringing with him good old Padre Juan, of that place.

The ceremony was to be performed at ten o'clock in the parlor of the Palace Royal, and as the hour drew nigh the invited guests began to assemble.

At the appointed time Padre Juan entered the room, followed by Jarvis Black and Stella Wilmont, who were supported by Raymond Wilmont and Nina Pabascoz.

The room was full, but not crowded, while upon the veranda there was a perfect mass of people.

"Here they come!" was passed from lip to lip, and then a cheer arose and well-wishes of all sorts were heard.

As the priest opened his little book there was a stir in the room, and Professor Artemus Buggs and Miss Julia Wilmont arose, hand in hand, and stepped out before him at the side of Jarvis and Stella.

"This lady having bestowed upon me her heart and hand," said Buggs, "we desire to have the same ceremony performed for us."

"This is quite a surprise," said Black, "though of course we are pleased to have company."

"But," said Padre Juan, "I cannot marry both at the same time."

"I had hoped that we might have that honor," said Buggs, "but if not we will wait."

"No, no," said Black, "we will wait."

"Yes," Stella added, "we will wait. Youth should ever and always give way to age."

The look that Miss Julie gave her was enough to chill the blood in her veins.

Padre Juan began the service, and in a few minutes Professor Artemus Buggs and Miss Julia Wilmont were made one.

Then the happy couples exchanged places, and the ceremony was commenced again. Padre Juan had asked the preliminary questions, and was about to proceed, when without the slightest warning a loud report was heard, and with a groan of agony Jarvis Black fell to the floor with a bullet in his breast.

"Ha, ha, ha! Santa Fe Pete never forgets!" cried the bully, in wild, demoniac tones, and his ugly face was seen for an instant at one of the windows. But these words were the last he ever uttered.

The two Chinamen, whose lives Jarvis Black had saved on the night of their arrival in Golden-Egg, were directly behind him, and as he turned to fly they each drove an ugly-looking knife into his heart.

"Chinaman he no forgettee, allee samee, too!" they said.

For a second every heart in the room ceased to beat, but the reaction soon came.

"I am a chief—a warrior bold,
And likewise a medicine-man,"

said the one-armed stranger with the big cane, as he stepped forward and produced some surgical instruments.

"Look out for the young lady," he added, "she's fainting!"

He quickly tore open Jarvis Black's clothes and began to examine the wound in his breast, while Major Wilmont and Raymond carried Stella away.

"Take me to my room," Black gasped, and he was lifted tenderly up and taken from the crowd.

With a practiced hand the stranger went to work, and in a little while he had found the bullet and removed it.

Major Wilmont entered the room at that moment, and turning toward the wounded man the first thing that met his eye was the Cross of the Golden Keys upon his breast.

"Great God!" he cried, "*he is her brother!*"

And sinking on a chair, he wept like a child.

An hour later Silver-Mask, the Man of Mystery, dashed into Golden-Egg, his horse white with foam.

Straight to the Palace Royal he rode, and springing from his horse he rushed up the steps and into the house.

"Is the wedding over?" he demanded.

"Yes," said the postmaster, who stood in the door of his little office; "all over."

"Too late—too late!" Silver-Mask cried, as he dropped on a chair; "my God, too late! And they are brother and sister."

Raymond Wilmont and Joe Garret happened to enter the room at that moment, and heard the words.

"Who are brother and sister?" asked Raymond.

Silver-Mask looked up, and seeing who the questioner was, replied:

"Jarvis Black and Stella Wilmont; otherwise, Miguel and Stella Rosario."

"Where is Major Wilmont?" Silver-Mask added.

"He is up in the room with Jarvis Black, who, it is feared, is dying."

"Dying! What has happened?"

"He was shot by Santa Fe Pete," replied Raymond. "You have so astonished me that I had forgotten to let you know what has happened here."

Raymond related the events of the morning, as they had occurred, and when he had done, they went up to the room where Jarvis Black was lying in the most acute pain.

Major Wilmont was walking the floor in a nervous manner, and the stranger, who was no novice as a "medicine-man," was carefully watching the wounded man on the bed.

"Do you know the truth, major?" Silver-Mask asked, with a nod toward the bed.

"Yes," the major replied, "I know all."

"Who is this gentleman—a doctor?"

Before the major could reply, the stranger exclaimed:

"Oh! I am a chief, a warrior bold, a medicine-man also, and a sort of universal genius, a jack-of-all-trades, as it were. My name is Smith. Barnaby Smith, M. D."

"Do you think the wound is fatal?" Silver-Mask asked.

"No," replied Smith. "He will come out all right. I have got the bullet out, and I have no fears now. The wound is a very bad one, though, and it was a close call for him to step across the 'big divide' and 'ante-up' his checks, but he'll pull through now."

"May I speak to him?"

"Yes, I guess he can talk a little without any harm, but I don't want him to do too much of it."

Silver-Mask approached the bed, and leaning over the wounded man, said:

"Is your name Jarvis Black or is it *Miguel Rosario?*"

Quick as a flash Jarvis Black turned his face to the speaker, but he quietly replied:

"My name is Jarvis Black. Why do you ask?"

Silver-Mask opened his buckskin hunting-shirt at the throat, saying:

"Have you a mark like this on *your* breast?"

"Yes," answered Black, "I have."

"Then, sir, your name is Miguel Rosario, and you have a sister whose name is Stella."

"That *was* my name, but it is not now. Sit down, and I will explain. But tell me, first, whether you know aught of my sister."

"Your sister is alive and well, and you shall soon see her. Now to proceed."

"When I was about ten years of age," said Black, "my father started with his family to come to America. The vessel was wrecked, however, and both my father and my mother perished, leaving me and my sister Stella orphans. I can remember Stella as a sweet-faced little child, whom I dearly loved."

"There were two gentlemen on board the vessel who cared for us. The name of one was Jean d'Amersforte, but the other's I do not remember. They were very kind to us. I had a broken arm at the time, and was ill for many weeks. I cannot, therefore, recall the events just as they happened. I never saw my sister but once after the wreck, that I can remember. It all seems like a dream."

"I know I lived in New York, and went to school there for a long time. As I grew older I began to think more and more about my lost sister. I even took an oath that I would find her if she lived. I questioned D'Amersforte, but he would give me no information at all."

"Then I ran away from school, resolved to be no longer dependent upon any man, and fully determined to find little Stella."

"Then it was that I changed my name, to hinder D'Amersforte from finding me, and took upon myself the name I now bear."

"The years passed away one by one, and I found that the search for my sister was almost a hopeless task, with only her name for a clue. I drifted to California, became interested in mining, and having become so used to my new name that I liked it better than the old one, I took the proper legal steps and adopted it. So, my true and only name is Jarvis Black. That is all, unless I add that I never heard a word concerning my sister until a moment ago, and now, if you know where she is, tell me."

"Your sister is at this moment beneath this roof."

"What!" and Black sprang up suddenly.

"Out of the room, every one of you!" exclaimed Smith, "and don't come back till I tell you to, or his life won't be worth a cuss!"

Major Wilmont, Raymond and Joe went out, and Silver-Mask followed.

They repaired to the major's room, where they found Stella with Professor Buggs and his bride.

Nina Pabascoz, Song-Bird and Dinah Lee, all trying to comfort the poor girl.

When Nina saw Silver-Mask she sprung into his arms with a cry of joy, while Song-Bird's pleasure at seeing him could be easily detected in her dancing eyes.

"Oh, papa," Stella moaned, "how is Jarvis—will he die?"

"No, little one," the major replied, "the doctor says he will live."

That afternoon, when Barnaby Smith, M. D., declared Black better again, Major Wilmont and Silver-Mask had a long talk with him. Professor Bracket found his way into the room, having heard something of the romantic story, and asked permission to publish it, which, after due consideration, was granted.

Here was an item for the *Golden-Egg News*.

CHAPTER XV.

KITTY WELLS MAKES A STAKE.

"UP the road, an' down th' road, Cooney, Cooney Clay!" was the cry that was heard two hours after the arrival of Silver-Mask at Golden-Egg, and the citizens beheld Cooney Clay and his horse Barnum flying down the street, while in the rear came Uncle Sidney Summers, Pat McCarty, Cock Robin, Kitty Wells, and the others of that party.

"Where, oh! where is Billiam Bloom, Th' deputy-sheriff man?"

sung Kitty Wells, as he drew rein at the Palace Royal. "I want to see him bad. He's got a thousand dollars fer me."

Mr. Bloom was right on hand.

"Here I am," said he; "who wants me?"

"Do you know this wiperous willain?" Kitty asked.

"What!" cried Bloom—"Billy, the Kid?"

"Th' werry identic."

"How in the name of the Seven Wonders did you catch him?"

"Oh!" said Kitty, "I managed to circumvent th' noble chief an' lay violent hands upon him; an' when that was done he was my mutton! An' now, Mr. Bloom, if ye've got th' thousand dollars about ye, I'm ready to take 'em."

"The reward is yours, my good man," answered Mr. Bloom; "but first let us put the prisoner where he will be safe, and then I will pay you the money."

"Nary!" said Kitty. "I want th' ducats put into my paw right here, or we don't trade."

There was no help for it, so the deputy-sheriff had to produce the required sum and hand it over. This done, he took charge of Billy, the Kid, and walked him to the hotel, where he put a pair of handcuffs on him.

Silver-Mask took the Indian girl, Black-Eyes, into the house, placing her under the care of his sister Nina. Song-Bird looked upon the stranger with no friendly glance, though she said nothing. But when she found a chance she proceeded to find out who and what the girl was. Song-Bird was no doubt a little jealous.

When the shades of night began to fall Mr. Bloom looked about him for a place to lodge his

prisoner, and at last hit upon the cabin where Billy, the Kid, had been confined before.

It was his intention to remain with the man himself, to see that he did not escape, and also to place a guard outside of the cabin to hinder any one from coming near.

For this duty he picked half a dozen good men, and having put his prisoner within the cabin he stationed his men on every side of it. Then, as it was yet early, he thought he would take a turn about the town before he entered the cabin for the night.

He walked back up the street as far as the Solid Comfort Saloon, and there he entered. It was past the hour of midnight when he thought of his prisoner and started for the cabin.

There upon the ground lay his guardsmen, bound hand and foot, while the door of the cabin stood wide open and Billy, the Kid, was gone.

The men did not know how to account for it. The first they knew, they said, a dozen men dropped right down among them, and they were caught before they could move. Then the men broke open the cabin and released the prisoner. It was evident that the Kid's men had been concealed upon the top of the cabin.

"There was weepin' an' wailin'," as Uncle Sidney Summers expressed it, "but it didn't do a mite of good. Th' blamed fool orter 'a' knowed better!"

Billy the Kid was gone, that was certain, and another thing that was equally as certain was, Mr. Bloom was a thousand dollars out of pocket.

The next number of the *Golden-Egg News* was replete with interesting matter.

The paper usually went to the press about seven or eight o'clock in the evening, and was published early the next morning; but on this issue the two Brackets had labored late into the night in order to do justice to the rush of news.

Cock Robin had been engaged again upon his return, and Professor Bracket threw himself into the editorial department, body and soul. The Reverend Abminadab assisted him.

The exciting affair at the wedding in the Palace Royal was set forth in glowing colors; the capture and escape of Billy, the Kid, ditto; while the burial of Santa Fe Pete and the exculpation of the Chinamen were equally well described.

On the first page and commencing in the first column, however, was evidently the master-stroke of this edition of the *Golden-Egg News*.

It ran as follows:

"TRUTH STRANGER THAN FICTION!"

"A ROMANCE IN REAL LIFE."

"For many years there has existed in Spain a secret religious order, known as the *Cross of the Gold n Keys*, which, at the present time is a powerful organization.

"Some time during the seventeenth century there came to America a party of holy friars, who represented this Order, bringing with them a large sum of gold, and founding a Christian Mission in the southern part of what is now New Mexico.

"Their mission flourished for a long time, and they built a city; but at last came trouble with the Indians, and they lost all. They never saw the land of their birth again. Only one of them lived to reach the city of Mexico, and there, after sending various maps and papers to the head of the Order in Spain, he died.

"About nineteen years ago there sailed from Spain a vessel laden with wine, bound for New York. This vessel, the Barcelona, was wrecked on the New Jersey Coast. Among her passengers was one Miguel Rosario, native of Barcelona, Spain, and member of the Order of the Cross of the Golden Keys. He was next of kin to the friar who had died in Mexico years before, and to him and the Order belonged the gold which the friar had buried somewhere in the New World. He had with him his wife and children, and it is of the latter that we are about to write.

"The eldest was Miguel, a boy about ten years of age, and the other was a little girl of four or five, named Stella. These children, like their parents, had upon their breasts a curious and indelible mark, two keys and two swords in the form of a cross, the sign of the Cross of the Golden Keys.

"When the vessel was wrecked the only persons saved were these children and their father, a man named Jean d'Amersforte, an American named Thomas Wilmont, and two sailors, one of whom was named Clay, an American by birth. Miguel Rosario, the father of the children, was badly wounded, however, and after giving the children into the care of Thomas Wilmont, he died. There was a belt around his waist containing his papers, etc., and these Thomas Wilmont and the man D'Amersforte examined, learning therefrom the secret of the friars' hidden treasure.

"Jean d'Amersforte was at heart a bad man. Like many another Frenchman, he was treacherous; and while he appeared to Thomas Wilmont to be his friend, he was planning at the same time to steal the papers, and find the buried gold for himself. But this he failed to accomplish. He took the boy, however, hoping some day to reap a rich reward by suddenly restoring him to his people in Spain; and thus brother and sister became separated.

"Thomas Wilmont adopted the little orphaned girl, giving her his own name, and she grew up as his own child. Jean d'Amersforte gave the boy a good education, and while he was at school spent most of his time in New Mexico, trying to find the lost treasure.

"As the boy grew older he began to have hopes that he might be able to find his sister, whom he remembered, and at last he ran away from school with that intention; and to hinder D'Amersforte from finding him he changed his name to *Jarvis Black*, which he afterward adopted as his true name.

"At the loss of the boy, D'Amersforte was wild with rage. He resolved to make one more attempt to find the friars' hidden gold, and failing in this he would by some means steal the girl Stella from Thomas Wilmont and take her to Spain, as he had intended to take the boy, trusting to chance to make something out of it. Accordingly he returned to New Mexico, and for several years, in company with the notorious outlaw, Billy, the Kid, searched for the treasure.

"Major Tom Wilmont, as he is now known, had a nephew, Raymond Wilmont and this young man was at this time a miner in Arizona; but having nothing but poor luck there he came to New Mexico, where he was fortunate enough to strike no less a prize than the Golden-Egg Mine. He was poor, however, and he sent for his uncle, Major Tom, to come out and see the property, and give him a start. This the major did, and some months later, when a city had sprung up he brought out his family.

"About this time Jean d'Amersforte began to lose faith in the story of the lost treasure, not being able to find it, and was about to return East, and steal the girl, when he learned that she was being brought right to him here. This was luck for the rascal indeed, and he engaged Billy, the Kid, to help him secure her.

"Every attempt they made to kidnap the young lady, however, was frustrated by the timely inter-

position of a stranger, who is now known hereabouts as Silver-Mask, the Man of Mystery.

"Jarvis Black was engaged to superintend the Golden-Egg Mine, and in the course of time, as we all know, he became the accepted lover of Miss Stella Wilmont. Previous to this, however, Silver-Mask had started to find the friars' hidden gold, being directed to the hiding-place by a clew which he picked up here in Golden-Egg.

"Among his men was one named Cooney Clay, who proves to have been one of the sailors who were saved from the wreck of the Barcelona. This man happened to relate a scrap of his history to Silver-Mask, who questioned him further, and learned that Major Wilmont's daughter was Stella Rosario! Mr. Clay having recognized the major, the moment he saw him, as a passenger on the Barcelona.

"Our readers will recall two items which appeared in the *News* a few months ago. One was an account of the robbery of Major Wilmont of some valuable papers by Billy, the Kid, and one of his men, and the other was a story about a wonderful valley of gold in the southern part of this Territory. The papers taken from Major Wilmont were the maps, etc., relating to the hidden treasure, and the man with Billy, the Kid, was John d'Amersforte. Being unable to secure the girl, he made another bold move to find the gold which he knew was hidden in the mountains, and, with the maps to guide them, he and Billy, the Kid, set out to find the place. The second item mentioned gave many of our citizens the 'fever,' and some of them went to find the place. Among these were Kitty Wells, and several others whom we know.

"Now, these two parties met and had a fight, and Silver-Mask appeared upon the scene with his party, just in time to turn the battle against Billy, the Kid, who was taken prisoner. In this fight Jean d'Amersforte met his doom.

"The rest of this fiction-like story you all know. But who and what is Silver-Mask? His name, we learn, is Miguel Pabascoz; but more than that we do not know, and therefore cannot tell you. Let us still call him the *Man of Mystery*."

Major Wilmont and Silver-Mask were seated in the office of the Golden-Egg Mine when Cock Robin made his round of delivery, and he rushed into their presence shouting:

"Double-headed extra! All the latest news! The capture and escape of Billy the Kid! Death of Sante Fe Pete! A wonderful romance in real life! Truth stranger than fiction!"

Major Wilmont read aloud the "romance in real life," and as he concluded, Silver-Mask said:

"I suppose I am a man of mystery, major, and I wish it were not so. I must ask you to allow me to retain my secret for a short time longer, though, and then you shall know all.

"I have a request to ask of you, and upon your answer depends much of my future. I must have Jarvis Black and Stella Rosario to accompany me to Spain, and I desire you to go too. I will state that I came to this country for the purpose of finding the lost treasure mentioned in the *News*, and also to find some trace of Miguel Rosario or his children; and as I have accomplished both objects, I must take positive proof to Spain to show that my mission is done.

"Of course I expect to bear all expenses, and I can promise you a glorious time while you are in Spain. What say you—will you go?"

"Yes," replied the major, "I will go. You must wait, however, until I can put my affairs

in proper shape, and then I shall be at your service.

"Thanks, major," responded Silver-Mask. "I shall not hurry you, so take your own time about it. And I promise to tell you, on the day before we sail, who and what I am. Then, thank God, after the object of our trip is accomplished, I can lay aside my silver mask! I wear it now to *protect my life!*"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FATE OF GOLDEN-EGG.

SIX weeks passed quickly by, and at the end of that time Jarvis Black was able to take charge of Golden-Egg Mine again.

His doctor had presented his bill as soon as Black had no further need of his services, and being promptly paid, that queer specimen of humanity declared his intention to go on a "tear."

"Oh, I am a chief," etc., he shouted; but when, a few days later, he left Golden-Egg, he was about as sorry-looking a "chief" as one could wish to see. Black gave Double Jimmie five hundred dollars to hand the doctor when he left his couch, and that was the last that was seen of Barnaby Smith, M. D.

Jarvis and Stella soon became accustomed to their new relationship, and were happy, as were all the others whose acquaintance we have formed. But the happiest of all, perhaps, were Professor Artemus Buggs and his bride.

Black settled his business in California through his lawyer, making arrangements to have his mine worked under the management of a friend, and Major Wilmont having settled up his affairs, they intended to start for the East, on the first of the coming month, leaving Raymond and Joe to run the mine.

The party started East, leaving behind them many warm friends, among whom were Uncle Sidney Summers, Kitty Wells, Pat McCarty, and others whose names have been mentioned in these pages.

One bright day, in the spring of 18—, the steamer City of Madrid started from New York, bound on a long voyage to the shores of sunny Spain.

Among her passengers were Silver-Mask and his companions. There was Major Wilmont, and near him stood Stella, looking out across the water. Prof. Buggs and his bride, Silver-Mask, Nina, Cooney Clay, Raymond Wilmont and Jarvis Black formed another group, while Great-Bear and Song-Bird stood apart.

Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Garret were to be seen, too; and Mrs. Garret was none other than the Indian girl, Black-Eyes, whom Joe had married in New York.

Silver-Mask had put aside his mask, but around his forehead he wore a bandage of cloth to hide from view the crimson mark of the *Cross of the Golden Keys*.

On the evening before sailing he had told his history and secret to Major Wilmont.

His name was Miguel Pabascoz. His father was a member of the Order of the Cross of the Golden Keys. Eight years previous to the time

of my story a traitor had given secret information to the world concerning the Order, and the finger of suspicion pointed direct to Miguel Pabascoz, Silver-Mask's father, although his guilt could not be proven.

He was tortured horribly, but he still declared his innocence. Then he was given a chance for his life. He had a son and a daughter. Miguel, the son, was twenty-five years of age, while Nina, the daughter, was but eleven. The commander of the Order had these two brought before him, and in the presence of the father he put upon the young man's brow a mask, which, *if seen by any member of the Order would instantly cost the wearer his life*, then giving him a sum of money, said:

"You can speak the English language. Go, and your sister with you, to America. Find there the buried gold of those of our Order who died years ago in New Mexico, and bring us tidings of the fate of Miguel Rosario and his family, who sailed in the ship Barcelona, in 18—. Do this, and return to me within six years from this day. Then your father shall be free, and the curse removed from your brow. *Fail!* and your father shall die, while the mark of a traitor shall remain upon you."

Then the commander gave him all the information he could to facilitate his search, and taking leave of his father, the young man and his little sister started upon their almost hopeless mission.

"But I have *not* failed," Silver-Mask said. "God has aided me thus far, and I have still two months and six days in which to reach Spain, and save my father. God be with me to the end!"

The vale of San Bernardino, in Southern California is an earthly paradise.

Several mansions are before us, surrounded by groves of trees laden with oranges, and fields ripe with grain, while grapes and other fruit abound in rich profusion.

One of the mansions is the home of Raymond Wilmont and his wife, Stella. They have two bouncing boys and a little girl, while Major Wilmont, hale and hearty, is with them. Dinah Lee, or rather Mrs. Rose, and her husband, are in their employ, as is Cooney Clay. The latter still keeps his big horse near him, and thinks him the finest animal in the world.

Another of the mansions belongs to Miguel Pabascoz (Silver-Mask.) His wife is none other than Song-Bird, the Indian girl. His father is with him, a white-haired old man who cannot speak a word of English, but who is as happy as a king.

Not far away live Jarvis Black and Nina, who have a little girl to bless their home. Kitty Wells is with them as right-hand man.

Professor Buggs is a big gun in some college in the East, and he and Julia live in a neat little cottage where they enjoy every earthly blessing. Joe Garret is a resident of San Francisco.

Major Wilmont Raymond, and Joe are still working the Golden-Egg Mine, but it is not paying as it did at first. Jarvis Black, however, owns the richest mine in California.

How Billy, the Kid from 'Frisco ended his days, is known to all.

THE END.

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